

The Consort

Mrs Everard Cotes

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THE CONSORT

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BY

MRS. EVERARD COTES

(SARA JEANNETTE DUNCAN)

AUTHOR OF

THE BURNT OFFERING, SET IN AUTHORITY,
HIS HONOUR AND A LADY, ETC.

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THE CONSORT

CHAPTER I

THE lift bell rang sharply, and Mrs. Emmett, putting down the tea-pot, said, "There, Richard."

It was a thing Mrs. Emmett was always saying, an exclamation that came from her, when the lift bell rang, as unfailingly as if she were automatically connected with the wire. "There, Richard," she said again.

Richard had his cup in his hand, and continued to carry it to his lips. He drank from it steadily and sufficiently, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and told his wife there was no need whatever for her to excite herself. Mrs. Emmett's words had not been excited, but Emmett had for some time felt them to be a second and unwarranted stroke of the bell, for which excitement was the only excuse, and that a bad one.

"I've no intention of breaking *my* legs," he told her.

He then pushed his chair back from the table and finished what he had been saying to Harriet Bidden, cook-general to Number Twenty-

Two, who returned Mrs. Emmett's resigned glance at her with sympathy. The bell rang again before he made his way to the door.

"I wonder who it is—in all this pour," said Harriet.

"If it was the Lord Mayor of London Emmett wouldn't hurry himself," Mrs. Emmett told her. "You'd think porters' places was to be had for the asking. A mite more marmalade, my dear, or a morsel of the cold bacon?"

Harriet refused with proper form, but was overpersuaded on Mrs. Emmett's assurance that she would cut it very thin.

"It never comes amiss, do it?" she agreed, in tones that went with a best hat and serious fur tippet costing twelve-and-six. Mrs. Emmett allowed warmly that boiled bacon was a thing, at any and at all times, that could be put on the table and eaten almost without regard to appetite.

Presently the rumble of the descending lift announced the return of Emmett, who resumed his seat with a fixed and somewhat portentous expression.

"Well?" said his wife. "Some stranger?"

"Not by no means," Emmett replied severely. "Gentleman for Number Twenty-Two."

Mrs. Emmett glanced apprehensively at her visitor, who put down her cup, with a tippet and feather that unmistakably bristled.

She then looked with reproach at her husband, who had deliberately, it seemed, brought contentious matter back with him from the lift.

Mrs. Emmett knew Harriet wouldn't let it pass, nor did she.

"That's nothing," Miss Bidden remarked pointedly, "to make a set-out about. We get a great many callers."

"I beg pardon," replied Mr. Emmett ceremoniously. "I merely and simply said 'Gentleman for Number Twenty-Two.'"

"Meaning one partic'lar gentleman—no, I don't think," retorted Harriet.

It was clearly not the first time that the gentleman had been carried up to Twenty-Two, and brought down again, in the abstract form of a subject, to lie with the cold bacon on Mrs. Emmett's tea-table.

"I don't say it's my business," admitted Emmett, "but I've got two eyes in my 'ed, same as other people, I suppose. And you may say it's been goin' on ever since the flat was occupied."

"What's been goin' on?" demanded Harriet.

"I ain't bound to say, but if you must 'ave it—calls, parcels seemingly containing books, letters, and cards with messages when out. Not to mention telegrams more than once, to go by the addressed answers, from the same party. I've known appointments—to the Ladies' Gallery."

"He's what you might call a relation, isn't he?" interposed Mrs. Emmett.

"Some connection of 'er stepmother's. That don't make it right or proper. Far from it. Pass the butter, Louisa, if you're done with it."

Mrs. Emmett passed the butter, and Harriet played a trump.

"The Captain's a Hem P.," she said, as she might have said he was a bishop.

Emmett disposed of a mouthful to give more withering passage to his reply.

"M.P. he may be. That don't give him no character—not at the present time," he retorted. "Those gentry has been found in the dock, likewise in the gutter, before to-day, though I don't say you'll always read it in the papers. Mere Popularity, that's what M.P. stands for, the way things are now. No reason why Richard Emmett shouldn't be M.P., if I was popular enough—same as 'im."

"Captain Acourt ain't that kind," said Harriet, with offence.

"Maybe he ain't, and maybe the lady what occupies Number Twenty-Two ain't that kind neither," said Emmett darkly. "I don't wish to pass any opinion. But this much I will say—that if I'd 'ave known what I was encouraging of, I'd have 'esitated before using my influence to get any relation of mine the position of cook there. I'd have thought it well over." And Emmett, having drawn his pipe from one pocket, explored another for tobacco.

Mrs. Emmett was removing the tea-things to the sink. Harriet took off her gloves, and with fierce self-suppression got out the dish-pan.

"Don't you trouble, dear," protested Mrs. Emmett. "I'm sure, Richard, you've no call to pass remarks about Miss Pargeter, so pleasant as she always is, and walks down them six flights nine times out of ten, as I've often heard you say."

" I don't deny she's pleasant, and I don't deny she rings up to be took down as seldom as anybody in these Mansions. But she belongs to a sect——"

" What sect ? " snapped Harriet.

" A litary, novel-writin' sect of young women that takes on themselves to start 'omes of their own. She's a bachelor girl, that's what she is—and I don't hold with 'em."

" She's got a stepmother, ain't she ? " demanded Harriet, turbulently polishing a plate.

" She's got Mrs. Leland Pargeter for a stepmother. A woman that gives away her thousands. Don't tell me she finds anything to complain of there."

" P'raps you know, and then again p'raps you don't."

" Well, perhaps *you* know ! What 'as she got to complain of ? " demanded Emmett.

" A stepmother's a stepmother, 'owever you put it," remarked Mrs. Emmett, without prejudice ; but the combatants allowed her words to drop into the sink.

" Mention her complaint," insisted Emmett. " Mention one single instance of cruelty or neglect, or any form of 'ard treatment whatever that can be laid at the door of Mrs. Leland Pargeter by her stepdaughter, Miss Pamela Pargeter, and I'll take leave not to believe it. What's the evidence—that's what I personally want to get at—what's the evidence ? "

But his niece only pinched her lips and turned her back on him, ostensibly to hang the cups on

the dresser ; and Emmett, after a pause of expectation, returned to his original grievance.

"Stepmother or no stepmother, she ain't a day over twenty-five," he summed up, "and she has no business to be receiving gentlemen callers without some female in the flat. Her novels ain't any protection to her. Why ain't you up there chaperonin' 'er now ?"

"The char's there," replied Miss Bidden, with resentment, "an' I lef' everythink 'ot. She 'ad no more to do than boil the kettle."

"Well," said Emmett, with sudden detachment, "the question is, can you or can you not accommodate the pram from Number Thirty, old lady ? It's a bloomin' garage as it is," he continued, surveying the two bicycles and the mail-cart that leaned against the wall ; "but I don't mind telling you it means 'alf-a-crown a month to me."

His niece Harriet, while he spoke, had been putting on her gloves as if for her usual afternoon out.

"It does keep on," she said, surveying the weather through the upper half of the Emmett's basement window. "I don't know as I'll get as far as Commercial Road. They won't be expectin' me—not in this weather."

"Oh, don't you go an' disappoint them, 'Arriet," urged Mrs. Emmett ; but Harriet vouchsafed no further hint of her intentions. She laid ostentatious hold of her umbrella, mixing further complaint of the weather with her brief farewells, and the door marked "Hall

Porter " closed upon her. Outside she stood for a moment at the entrance as if debating the prospect, which was brightening, and then discreetly mounted the stone stairs that twisted up into the lofty interior of Pembroke Mansions. Half-way she paused to take breath. " It's nothing but his suspicious-mindedness," she said, with a look down the well of the staircase, but mounted again. At the door of Number Twenty-Two she produced the latch-key of the faithful servant.

" I can say it looked too threatenin'," she murmured, and went in.

CHAPTER II

IN the little turret drawing-room of her little modern flat Pamela Pargeter heard the latch-key turn, and glanced through the open door and along the passage to see Harriet admit herself. The arrival was clearly an interruption; the quick movement of her head said that; although, if she had taken time to reflect, even an instant must have convinced her that nobody beside herself had a latch-key except Harriet, and that Harriet could be no interruption. It may be inferred that she did not take time to reflect, even an instant, and that the unexpected sound struck upon her nerves.

It was a delicate little room in spite of its queer shape, gentle with white muslin curtains and flowers, agreeable with books, distinguished with the absence of unjustifiable things. It may have been reticent because it had to be, the queer shape permitting no excursions of fancy; but there was at least a parallel in Pamela's way of doing her hair, parted in the middle, and waving to a knot at the nape of her neck; and her quiet eyes and composed lips offered another; and then her dress, as subdued, as perfect, as right as some shy animal's—these annotations of Pamela made the room inevitably hers. People

who came to see her often remembered that her mother had been an American. There were little things that spoke of that, little things that once looked English by the Mississippi.

She sat sunk in a deep chair by the tea-table, and it was no jar to her harmony that she should be smoking. Her attitude was nonchalant and graceful; even her eye moved without hurry when it accosted the tall fellow with his arm along the mantelpiece, who shook his cigarette-ash into the fire in the intervals of their talk. The tenseness in her was carefully cloaked and guarded, a kind of gathering of herself in the protection of all her forces, the most perfect hiding, with never a chink for betrayal. Yet he must have guessed something of it; otherwise he would hardly have spoken so deliberately, so consciously as he did. He must have felt her watching him with every nerve behind her quiet glances, must have known that the occasion was not one to be summed up in a trivial cup of tea. He did know at least as much as this, that he was playing with Miss Pargeter a game in which reticences were all-important; and there is no doubt that his cards were quite as good as hers.

Captain Acourt also just lifted an eyelid as the key turned, looked at the floor and paused. He too made ready for some unexpected advent; and Pamela was startled into saying more than she would have wished when she said:

“I thought for an instant it might have been Madre. But of course she would have rung.”

Instead of replying, Captain Acourt replaced his cigarette between his lips and left it there, folding his arms. Her allusion appeared to impose a further silence upon him which he broke only after a moment of reflection. Even in removing his cigarette he seemed to gain time.

"I dined there last night," he said. "In Arlington Street."

"Oh," she answered as to an accustomed hearing, and then added irresistibly, "I suppose papa——"

"No. I understood he was in Oxfordshire."

"Poor papa! Madre's dinner-parties are always too much for him. It's very good of you to assist so often."

"Don't say that. I like going. You know my admiration for your—for Mrs. Pargeter."

"Yes, I know it." She turned a child-like look upon him. "It's an admiration shared by all the world, isn't it? But—well, did you enjoy yourself?"

"Yes," said Acourt stoutly. "Walter Norreys was there."

"Walter Norreys!" exclaimed Pamela, with astonishment. "But since when? I thought he was the arch-fiend!"

"I got leave to introduce him, and it was a great success. She likes him tremendously. She has even——"

"Subscribed to the *Constitution*," Miss Pargeter laughed; and he nodded, smiling with the pleasure of being anticipated by her.

"Not really! Well—if you have trained her

eye upon the *Constitution*—I begin to think you may yet have your reward.”

“He is also to send her that last thing of his, ‘The Priceless Individual.’ Rather, if my memory serves, he is to bring it—down to Hareham for a quiet week-end.”

Pamela considered.

“I’m afraid the foundations are rocking,” she told him.

He paused again on this, and sought her face studiously, as if to ascertain whether she meant what she said.

“Norreys will certainly help to rock them,” he informed her. “He was at his best last night—extraordinarily telling.”

Pamela shook her head with decision.

“Nobody is at his best in Arlington Street,” she said. “It must have been his second-best. But even Walter Norreys’ second-best would be useful, no doubt. Who else?”

“The Warburtons, the Powells, Alfred Dacre——”

Pamela dropped her hand with a gesture of exclamation.

“A mere chorus for Norreys! She has capitulated!”

“I wonder?”

“And it is all your doing—all. She would have listened to no one else; no one else has been—near enough to her. She and her traditions, they are so apart. But you are quite wonderfully near her.”

Miss Pargeter spoke with just an effort at

generosity and a touch of resoluteness, as if she looked the fact fully in the face ; but her eyes, lifting toward his, stayed themselves on the mantelpiece.

“ Oh, to me, too,” he declared, “ she is very much a priestess who lives within her temple. And one does not carry a temple ”—he bent upon her his extraordinarily charming smile—“ by assault. But I have great faith in Norreys. The average man is too stupid to take his message—distrusts a poet and a prophet in public affairs. But women are more intuitive. They see the truth behind that rolling eye of his, and surrender.”

“ So you think it would be a great matter to bring her over.”

“ Well, wouldn't it ? ”

At that Pamela looked at him very directly.

“ I suppose she could be of some assistance to the party exchequer,” she said courageously.

Her reward was to see him flush, and she took it with intentness.

“ No doubt,” he said stiffly, “ if she were attracted to such forms of usefulness. But that would be the least part of her value to us.”

He expressed, with his head up, an extreme distaste for the consideration of money ; and by the mere way he went on smoking he created and passed over a lapse of taste in her allusion.

“ You mean she would be such a fearful example.”

“Not a ‘fearful’ example—an illustrious, dramatic, and most effective example. Do for one moment look at her—the single custodian of great wealth who has anticipated the State’s growing demands upon great wealth, who spends it, and has for years been known to spend it, not in egotistical endowment of municipal luxuries, but in ways which amount to the simple relief and benefit of the community. Her help to national technical education alone—I say ‘help,’ but she has practically created our new position in the world’s workshop—makes her political position of extraordinary importance.”

Pamela listened with a slightly chidden air.

“Yes,” she said.

“Hitherto, you see, she has been the glory and the triumph of the other side. She has nothing in common with them; her mind is fundamentally Whig; but the Gommies have a strong hold upon her, as you know—”

“She is naturally drawn to a vegetarian,” murmured Pamela. “They sit at her feet, and instruct her.”

“And they have long quoted her at the Outlook Society—much against her will, I know—as the apotheosis of all they would ever be. She is a whipping-post for every other big income in the kingdom, and a lamp to the leader-writers of the whole Socialist Press. You remember how, when her father died, they rose and demanded, with one voice, that she should be made a baroness in her own right, since there was no successor.”

"She was approached, but she refused. And I am glad she did. It would have been too insupportable. Mr. Pargeter and the Baroness——"

"Why insupportable? She is in all their pulpits." Acourt went on without waiting for an answer. "And the mere spectacle of her coming round——"

"Like a ship—a stately ship," put in Pamela, with closed eyes. "The Mary Pargeter Neo-Conservative Navigation Company. London and the Future."

"Will be enormously educative," but he looked down to hide a smile.

"'Will be.' Then you are pretty sure of her?" Pamela opened her eyes.

"Well, if you had heard—— The Gommies are precisely, you know, at this moment inviting her to champion, in her effective way, certain extensive ameliorations in the economy of workhouses. Norreys, of course, hadn't an idea of it; but, I think, after his attack last night on the whole rotten system of public relief as these islands indulge in it——"

"You think——"

"That she will view their project with more distrust," Acourt said in a tone of impartiality. "However, I have been pretty certain for some time. She is really now, I think, very keen on our co-operative scheme for small holdings and agricultural banks. She has been going into it with quite wonderful acumen and grasp. But such considerations are quite second to the

importance of bringing her over personally. Definitely, if possible, and without a backward glance."

"And without a backward glance," repeated Pamela. "Well, she will come like that, if she does come."

"I have set my heart on it," he told her, almost with frankness.

It brought to her lips a thing she had often longed to say: "Why don't you ask me to help you?"

He considered this apparently on its merits, but there was a touch of embarrassment in his reply.

"I don't think you could. Do you?"

She looked happier to have got the question out, and almost satisfied with his answer.

"I dare say not. We are so different. She distrusts all my opinions, and she would certainly despise me upon small holdings and agricultural banks. We seem to drift, every day, further apart. . . . I'm afraid she finds it hard to forgive me—this." She indicated the little room.

Acourt looked thoughtfully out of the window as if "this" might be debatable. Pamela felt the reserve in him, and had to defy it.

"I know you think I ought to have stayed," she accused him, "there in that stifling house. And please don't forget that I did stay, for two mortal years longer than I had to, knowing, as I did, how she would hate to be thought to have failed with me—poor Madre. She wouldn't have

failed with anyone else. Anyone else would have worshipped her, as I can sometimes—at this distance. I was eleven when they were married and she began her tremendous mothering of me. That devoted, uncomprehending bosom—those eternal folding wings! How I suffocated!”

“They were beautiful wings,” he observed gravely.

“Oh, as beautiful as you like,” she returned, and seemed sharply to turn from the subject. A silence fell between them, which he sustained without changing his position on the hearth, his elbow dropped upon the pseudo-Adams mantelpiece. It was a silence full of things unconfessed and uncertain; and once or twice as it passed he let his intelligent full brown eyes rest upon her with an expression so controlled as to be almost hostile. Still he stood there, and still Pamela Pargeter sat, with the end of her cigarette in her hand, trying to find courage to get up and come nearer to him and throw it in the fire. It threatened to burn her fingers, and still she did not move, because she wished to put it in the fire, and he was so in possession of the fire, standing there with his arm along the mantelpiece.

It was Harriet who broke whatever bound them, Harriet appearing in the door with the neatest of her afternoon aprons pinned over the skirt which had abandoned its afternoon out.

“Shell I take away, if you please, miss?”

“ Yes, Harriet—this too, please.” And Miss Pargeter held out her cigarette end for a convenient saucer.

So Harriet, in her capacity of chaperone, took everything away.

CHAPTER III

WHEN Leland Pargeter married Mary Lossel people who knew them both said it was the only practical thing he had ever done, and the only romantic one that had ever distinguished her. Made sole mistress at twenty of the accumulations, covering the best part of a dozen reigns, piled up by the singularly fortunate banking house of Lossel, the Honourable Mary had already been for five years in the public eye. She took her place there with something of the self-possession and dignity of a royal personage of the last century, whose girlish example she carefully studied, feeling herself also youthful and in heavy responsibility ; and it soon began to be reported of her that she, too, held her own councils, and made, subject to the advice of experience, her own decisions. The Lossels had not been originally English, but they had easily acquired the predatory habits of their adopted island ; and their wealth bore the stamp of many an exotic mint. This was, of course, the merest barbarian tribute to intelligence ; but for Mary, coming into millions all created and shining and already historic, this jostling of crowned heads and great enterprises at the desks of her cashiers gave a sublimer reading to the testamentary

clauses that put her in charge. She took up her sceptre with a mind as detached from the common appreciation of money as it could well be. Queen Victoria wasted very little consideration, one imagines, upon her place in society; Mary took her wealth for granted in much the same way. For generations her forbears had used it as they used air or water. Old Lord Lossel, her father, made a point of never handling a coin of the realm. He found that it simplified life to be unconscious of money, and it was his happy situation to be able to ignore all the common aspects of it.

Mary had been educated in her responsibilities; but it had occurred to no one to teach her to increase them to her own advantage—as a woman perhaps limitations were conceded to her. At all events, she approached her great wealth with the single desire to administer it conscientiously. Such debtors as the Emperor of Russia, the Republic of China, and the Isthmian Canal might have dazzled the imagination of another woman with visions of immediate and splendid importance. To Mary they simply served to increase the divorce between herself and her money. She had got so far away from it that she had begun to look at the revenues she controlled much as a constitutional ruler looks at the public exchequer. They were nobody's in particular and everybody's in general. Under, of course, the most economical and profitable laws of administration.

Miss Lossel's warmest admirers admitted that

from the beginning she had been a woman of business. Even in the beauty of her girlhood she had an air of looking down deep queries and lifting her head with firmness to take the most desirable line. She had been doing it for five years when Leland Pargeter met her, carrying on her own affairs so conspicuously that he sometimes wondered, in the pauses of his good fortune, when it became plain that she liked him, whether she would ever get out of the habit. The pauses never lasted long; the good fortune was too amazing.

Pargeter, when it arrived, was in the unusual position of a man of thirty-six who had definitely renounced a career. The career was diplomacy; and Pargeter had turned his back upon the Courts of Europe, because he found his relations with them dull. The official harness chafed him, and he complained, in justifying himself, that an embassy attached by wire to the British democracy was an obsolete thing in an impossible relation. There was no initiative, no margin, no romance, and everything was discounted in the papers. As to his existence in its gayer aspect he said it was *macabre*. It is easy to agree that he must have found it so; and that it was really rather to his credit that he sustained it as long as he did.

Pamela's mother, no doubt, had something to do with that. Pargeter married early and imprudently as attaché to the embassy at Washington; and one can imagine that his first wife helped him through it while she lived—the

fragile and charming creature who found so much to laugh at and so little to dislike in their joint experience. But he left her one rainy afternoon in the English cemetery at Vienna; and as the embassies dissolved about her grave, feeling himself, even in sanctuary, beset by invisible swords and buttons, he determined that for him, too, this should be the end, that they should resign, he and Delphine, in their different ways together. The resolution took place in a bosom moved enough and full of loss, but owning that unearthly sway of temperament to which the human affections will generally listen, even in tears. Pargeter readily obtained short leave of absence, the end of which found him signing a three-years' lease of bachelor apartments in Pall Mall. Pamela had been sent into Surrey, planted out there to come up in the shade of her excellent English governess; and Leland hung his crape-bound hat in the passage of his lonely lodging in the happiness of having divested himself of all responsibility except to the Muses. He had no people to be pacified, no debts of any consequence to be paid. The five hundred a year which had helped to make him eligible for his country's diplomacy remained with him; and the three hundred of her own that had just made it possible for his dead Delphine to marry him would come in due time to Pamela. The Muses, whom he had held at arm's length so long, were at last his only family. As he clicked the door upon his solitude the flat seemed full of them.

And for five years they remained his intimates,

the Muses, though they did not reward him with any generosity. One might say that they treated him badly, leading him on, for example, with such a thing as a successful curtain-raiser or a really good little sketch, and plainly abandoning him in the play or the novel where he would naturally lean upon them most, basely substituting Ibsen or Meredith, perhaps, in their places. And poor Leland could never see the trick that had been played upon him.

In spite of this coquetry the five years passed happily for Pargeter. He kept on trying always for the grasp and the insight which would have made the bigger things possible to him; and every now and then he gathered up the essays which he executed with such delicacy of touch for one of the more literary dailies, and found a publisher willing to pay him fifty pounds for them. He had, as well, a very great social gift; it was a question which of these talents most adorned Pargeter; he wore them on suitable occasions like twin flowers in his button-hole. He was candidly literary, made charming confidences about his writing, which were always worth repeating. People liked him immensely for them.

Then came the tremendous episode of Mary Lossel. You could not call it anything but tremendous—she, a person whose dinner-parties were discounted on Change, and he a scribbler in an attic. Was she touched by the romance of the attic? Was she struck by his abandonment of all that seemed to her most imposing? Who

is learned in these things? She looked with favour upon him; she practically chose him. Perhaps she obscurely felt that she had something like a right to do this. One never knows to what point eminence will flatter. She may have seen him a Consort; assuredly she made him one. And it was Pargeter's imagination, oddly enough, that misled him into the belief that he wanted to marry her. For her beauty, chastely lighted as it was by that great lamp of duty, he had only a theoretic admiration; her heart he admitted on the same terms. Her mind had no mysteries for him even then; and he was above the material temptation of her money-bags. But there remained the attractive picture of his place beside her—no, of himself in her place. That is how he saw it; that is where his imagination failed him. The unlucky fellow must needs take the great business of his life to prove its defect upon. Never for one instant did he suspect the Consort that lurked in his wedding garments.

Well, the years had proved it to him, beginning at once. Never for one moment had she ceded her place, her inherited and consecrated place. He looked after the leases; he bought the motors; he discovered and engaged the *chefs* that made sauces to her greater honour; and she consulted him as to who might be suitably asked to meet a visiting grand-duke. Her greater anxieties she did not invite him to share; rather, indeed, it seemed to his sensitiveness that she added him to her minor responsibilities. She did this without any intention, or even any particular

consciousness. Consciousness would have made her to blame ; she was not to blame. Their situation seemed to be dictated by natural law. She swam on in her appointed path, and he with her, as unable to get away as any other attending planet.

There were no children—a grief to her. She had all the natural griefs, being made for all the natural functions, very much a woman in spite of her aspect of financial goddess. The goddess held Pargeter longest. The woman tired him very soon ; but the goddess he looked at with interested eyes long after he had begun heartily to deplore having married her. But it was a gift without a charm in it, at all events for him ; and eventually he let it go with the rest of her in the general landslip that overtook their married life.

Perhaps that is too violent a way of describing it, since it was marked by no scenes and certainly by no scandal. It was rather a general imperceptible caving in for lack of foundations that never had been there ; and it was obvious to numbers of people before it was to Mary. When it did become plain to her it simply put her duty to Leland at a new angle. It had come to duty. He had a brilliantly critical view of his wife, but he never saw himself in those wonderful scales of hers which weighed many matters beside gold. Very early had she weighed him, and made him swing even with her duty—the husband she had imagined him on one side, and he and her duty on the other. Having ascertained the just balance, she set herself to keep it, and Leland's

misery increased with everything she did in pursuit of that ideal. For years he looked about him desperately; and it is said that various expedients occurred to him before that of deserting her in her own house. If they did she turned her beautiful eyes another way. The Lossels did not fail in their undertakings—that would be the lowest ground on which she saw any alternative he may have laid open to her. Her vast business had many legal aspects; she discussed everything in the world with her solicitors; but it is doubtful whether they ever heard her mention her husband's name.

So there was Leland Pargeter in the Heaven to which he had climbed, cut off from rescue by the good will of the angel by his side; and there had he been for fourteen years. There was heaven to range, of course, from attic to cellar; it was understood that he chose a small north room on the third floor where he could write without being disturbed.

And Pamela, all the time, had been looking on. It was the beginning of pain for Mary Pargeter when she realised that Pamela was looking on—Pamela whom she had so eagerly claimed, and so truly loved from the beginning. Pamela who had soon begun to represent the single solid good in this private transaction that had given Mrs. Pargeter so permanent a distrust of her own judgment in the great matters of life and love. Wise little thing as she had always been, she seemed to come unnaturally early into some sort of possession of the relations between

her father and his wife, and to look up from Mary's bosom into her face with eyes strangely like his. Another woman, in Mary's place, might have felt herself accepted by the child, but not condoned. That was not the way she perceived it, having no hint of subtlety or of cynicism in all her very remarkable equipment. She grieved under a different explanation, reflecting more directly on herself, and sent for a new German handbook on the management of children, which she had heard highly recommended.

Time, of course, only made matters clearer; and the day came when Pamela heard her father's step upon Mrs. Pargeter's marble stair, and knew in every fibre of her being how his foot spurned it. That knowledge brought with it no problem, no choice of sides. For Pamela there had never been more than one side. Never, through all the gratitude and affection that obediently answered Mary's mothering of her, could Pamela for one instant fail in sympathy for that unsatisfactory person in the small north room who was so clearly at odds with the luxuries that surrounded him in other parts of the house.

And it is not wonderful that the young thing should presently begin to feel that she shared in his disabilities, whatever they were, and to knock her breast against the bars simply because it was his cage. There was a great deal of the unexpressed between these two, and some of it was not said the day he told her of the little indepen-

dent income that was coming to her. He told her almost furtively. Perhaps he felt in his words some last betrayal of the woman he had married. But Pamela took it from him very clearly that for her at least the door would some day be open, a day to which she began to look forward from that hour.

"You'll come to tea with me then, won't you, papa?" she said at once.

"When you're married, Pam?"

"Not when I'm married—when I'm rich," she told him, and his "Nonsense" was as far as possible from closing the matter.

Between them they discovered her talent about the same time; something else to foster in secret. It was long before Madre knew, and longer still before Pamela could bear without discomfort the tender interest her gift excited in her stepmother when she did know. The crisis arose at once of showing manuscripts.

"Oh, dearest," protested Pamela, "I'd so much rather you saw it in print. It just makes all the difference."

It did make all the difference when Mary ceded the point; but it did not make difference enough. The talent grew wings of its own to beat the bars with. The cage was double-locked. If one could not live in a cage, still less could one write there, writing being to Pamela life in its most intense and exquisite form. This was plain even in the beginning, and two or three years later it became clear to Leland Pargeter that his daughter would probably produce better

books than ever he would. She had begun to write them before she left Arlington Street. Poor Mary had the privilege of spreading the banquet that honoured the first. It was graced by the presence of a literary Royalty, and Mr. Pargeter further ensured its success by being there himself. Percy Acourt was also of the party ; and it was on that very night that Mary Pargeter discovered how little it mattered, in view of the graver thing that had taken possession of her life, whether her stepdaughter left her roof or not. Captain Acourt, at all events, had come to stay.

CHAPTER IV

“**B**UT why shouldn't I go ? ” demanded Lady Flora Bellamy across one of the little tables ranged along the wall of the dining-room of the Court Club, where she was giving Leland Pargeter lunch.

Lady Flora was the widow, not yet much past thirty, of Colonel Victor Bellamy, who was lying in the grave a polo accident had made for him at Peshawar. Lady Flora had joined the Court Club, whose simple rule it was that every member should have been presented, about a year after her husband's death, and had used it very constantly since. She led, she said, a lonely life, and her club was a great source of distraction to her. Leland Pargeter often lunched with her at her club. He was also a source of distraction to Lady Flora ; and it made her very happy to entertain him there.

They were talking of the same dinner-party that had occupied Pamela and Captain Acourt the afternoon before. Lady Flora had been present, though Captain Acourt had failed to mention it to Pamela. She was a person whose name would not be the first to leap to the tongue of a man like Acourt in describing a party. A

man like Acourt might forget, taking a little trouble to do it, that she had been there. A man like Pargeter might wonder, as Leland had just wondered, what in the world had induced her to go.

She was slight and very graceful ; she put both elbows on the table when it pleased her to do so ; her modish hat seemed to lie happily upon her charming hair. She had dreamy eyes and a detached expression ; she looked as if she might say anything ; and she very often did. She still had a wayward air which she would presently have to relinquish, and an inconsequence which she probably never could. Her eye wandered perpetually as she talked, and when she put a morsel into her mouth she would sometimes appear to forget about it, so that it did not seem always certain, for a hypnotised instant, that she would swallow it. Her beauty was a thing of large brown eyes, and carmine, and very great attention. Pargeter once said of her that she was an agreeable effect, until you said to her : " Psyche, come here," when she flitted away into the night. Pargeter was one of the few people who went on with the illusion of her, unwilling to forget that the reality had been charming.

" But why shouldn't I go ? "

" Lord only knows," he told her, " I never do."

" Because you are naughty. But extremely naughty," she charged him. " What are you going to drink ? Always whisky-and-soda ? That shows great lack of confidence in our wine list."

Lady Flora beckoned to the head-waitress, who came with alacrity.

"A whisky-and-soda for this gentleman, Annie, and the tiniest bottle of Bollinger for me. Your foot better, Annie?"

"Yes, m'lady. Yes, thank you, m'lady. Coffee here, m'lady, or——"

"Coffee in the smoking-room, please, Annie. I *was* so sorry about the poor foot," and Lady Flora sweetened her sympathy with a smile.

"Poor thing, she scalded it. But we were talking about your wife."

"You were," said her guest.

"I could talk about her always. She *is* so good to me"—and Lady Flora's eyes opened themselves suddenly wider and softer, to rest upon Pargeter's.

"I love just being with her, in her atmosphere," she went on. "And you are the most foolish of persons."

Pargeter helped himself to the vegetables brought to his elbow. "Sea-kale again!" cried Lady Flora. "Oh, Jenny, Jenny, this is too bad of Alphonse. Tell him I said so."

Jenny retreated, blushing and smiling, and Lady Flora went on:

"They're keeping company, she and the *chef*, and all the rest are madly jealous. That pretty girl is doing very well for herself. Alphonse gets a hundred and fifty a year and buys everything."

"Are you still on the Committee?" asked Pargeter.

"No," said Lady Flora. "There was a

conspiracy against me at the last general election, and I didn't get enough votes. I'm afraid we're very feminine in the Court, and some of us a trifle cattish." She smiled disarmingly. "But I know all these poor dear things"—her nod embraced the waitresses—"and they tell me their troubles, and I think they love me a little, though I *absolutely* respect the rule about tipping. They know that in my heart I hate their being waitresses and me being a lady of quality, and so—— Yes, I adore the woman of whom you are so unworthy, Leland Pargeter."

"I perfectly agree as to the unworthiness. So you spent a happy evening."

"Ye-es. We had a darling little talk before the men came up. It would have been happier without the men. I think I am usually"—Lady Flora crumbled her bread pensively—"happier without the men." And, as Pargeter only smiled, she went on, "There was one particularly tiresome man."

"Percy Acourt?"

"Oh, I never find Captain Acourt tiresome. He's so good-looking, and you never can be quite sure whether he is aware of your presence or not. That kind of man intrigues me. I long to bring him to my feet, or see him horribly humiliated——"

"In some other way," laughed Pargeter.

"Oh, any way. Acourt *was* there," Lady Flora interpolated, looking at her guest with sudden attention, "but this was a creature I'd never seen before; and he talked—merciful heavens,

how he talked ! In a dreadful mesmeric way that *made* you listen whether you understood three words or not. The editor of some paper."

"It couldn't have been Norreys."

"*Mais si !* It was precisely Norreys. Neither an ambassador nor a bishop nor a duke, but the editor of a newspaper, a sort of everything, and his name *was* Norreys."

"Ah," said Pargeter thoughtfully, "that looks as if they were getting hold of her."

"She has promised to read some pamphlet of his," contributed Lady Flora intelligently, "and he is to go down to Hareham this next week-end."

"Remarkable fellow, Norreys," mused her guest. "A bit overpowering, but—— However, it's odd, you know, but I was dining with the Gommies."

"The Gommies ? The Gommies ? "

"The Clarence Gommies—State Labour Party. He is in the House."

"The man who cut the King ! "

"You can't 'cut' the King any more than you can 'cut' the Commonwealth. But, yes, Gommies did indulge in some antic which he is now trying to forget."

"But isn't it true that he said, 'No, I can't shake hands with you, sir. You and I are enemies' ? "

"I really don't know what form it took. Gommie is an advanced Radical politically, and the crudest ass socially, I should imagine."

"And you were dining with *them* ? "

Lady Flora's face assumed a mixture of

sophistication and concern. Her expression admitted that people had to do all kinds of things for all kinds of reasons, deep and knowing reasons, and nobody understood what a deplorable bore it was better than she.

"Yes," admitted Pargeter, putting up an eyeglass to scan a group of ladies taking their places at another little table, and bowing with much finish to one of them. "We had ten vegetables and a boiled hare. The hare was served on my account; but it was needless. I suffered almost as much as Mrs. Gommie in contemplating it. We agreed that we could not endure a corpse upon the table."

"Was it a party?"

"One man, whose name you wouldn't know—the Labour Whip. It was to meet him I went; for that the hare was slaughtered and the vegetables died. I was rather impressed with him—very able fellow, dined in his red tie; fancy he sleeps in it. We all dined in our red ties, by request."

"You haven't got one," exclaimed his hostess intimately.

"Not, so to speak, in the silk. But in the spirit, dear Lady Flora, all my ties will shortly be of that colour. At least, I am seriously considering it. Don't you think the shade would become me?"

Lady Flora's eyes ranged over his person, as if to find out. It was a fairly impressive and attractive person, though middle-aged. Nothing really detracted from him yet; even his slight

baldness suggested itself as being very slight. The heaviness of his oval chin and the sleepiness of his blue eyes had always been there, though the look that seemed perpetually to expect and demand of life may have come only after years of dissatisfaction with it. His other features were so regular that one forgot them at once.

It was really a little difficult to say whether Mr. Pargeter's was a countenance to which red would be becoming or not. Lady Flora, at all events, would not decide off-hand. She had no natural love for red ties; but she had none the less an impulse ready to welcome one under Leland Pargeter's chin if he should decide to put it there.

"I am horribly intrigued," she said. "You shall explain in the smoking-room. You can find your way there, can't you? I will join you in two seconds," and it was only when Pargeter was well out of the room that she approached the cashier's desk and paid. Lady Flora had in a high degree the gift of consideration.

CHAPTER V

MRS. PARGETER, when in London, was nearly always to be found at home on Wednesday afternoons. It had been her mother's habit and her grandmother's ; and though Mary could hardly be said to cling to her traditions she carried them on. Other people allowed their lives to become too complicated for fixtures that dated from a simpler time, for any fixtures at all that could not be made by telephone and carried out by motor ; but Mary, on her island in Albemarle Street, let the tide sweep by, lighted the tea-urn that had been Horace Walpole's, and possessed her soul. She was drawn to the tea-urn that had been Horace Walpole's as she had been drawn to Leland Pargeter, for the quality of sprightliness that remained in them. The Fragonards and Bouchers that hung in her ivory-coloured panels, and the wits of three centuries that stood along her bookshelves spoke mutely through their garlands to the same effect. Even the mantelpieces, late Georgian and a little over-decorated, seemed to confess to an innocent passion for the arabesques of life ; and all the furniture was Italian and sentimental.

On those Wednesday afternoons the best of London drifted through Mary Pargeter's drawing

room. Rather it seemed to cling and hang there, the best of London, with an instinct that such footholds were growing few. It was always in some sense the best; and it was easy to pierce and see that the fundamental sense was moral. On almost any given Wednesday the little gathering—being so eclectic, it was never large—might have been imagined to have bent its steps toward Mrs. Pargeter's drawing-room only after careful self-examination. "Am I worthy?" each might have asked his private conscience; and seldom, indeed, would one have ventured to differ from the assurance "Yes, you are." Ministers came with an accord they might seldom show in other directions; ambassadors, naturally, were almost accredited. Bishops gravitated, folding plump hands and crossing well-appointed legs; pro-consuls, straightening shoulders relieved of the burdens of Empire, took shelter with Mrs. Pargeter from the undiscerning street; the savants of Europe rumped and lowered bushy grey heads in close encounter there. The arts were shyer, but they came, rather under compulsion and wondering why, the reason being simply that Mary desired to have them. She was very kind to the arts, purchasing and commanding. She even encouraged eminent actresses, who arrived in tragically simple clothes, bringing their husbands. She had a weakness for literature and a sincere reverence for rank; she was therefore attended by writers and duchesses. Duchesses of serious tastes, literary or philanthropic, these, however, being

seldom accompanied. It may be that there is something abidingly frivolous in a duke.

Only two forms of distinction refused to flourish in Mrs. Pargeter's drawing-rooms. Smartness, however smart, withered upon her inlaid sofas, and true Bohemians kept away by instinct. One eminent vagabond of ideas had fenced with her invitations for years ; but Mary was very patient, adding ever another to the paradoxes she proposed that he should justify when he came.

In all this I know that I have not accounted for Lady Flora Bellamy, who fluttered so often past the powdered footmen and up the white staircase in Arlington Street. Lady Flora, I fear, was not of the best by any definition that would have applied there ; but she had moods in which she loved to take the colour of it, and breathe the same air with it. This is enough by itself to prove her not of the worst either. She naïvely proclaimed herself agnostic ; but in addition to the profoundest faith in the clairvoyantes of Bond Street she had really quite a religious outlet in her worship of Mary Pargeter. And Mary, in her kind, catholic way, welcomed her always. Her heart was too empty to close against a butterfly that prayed to come in.

The Lossels had grown to greatness under Whiggery, and had clung to the party which had protected and fostered their alien capacities, through all the liquefying processes which have marked its descent to the twentieth century. Mary perhaps had been the first

downright Radical, the first practically who had a chance to be. Old Lord Lossel, her father, had outlived, as it were, his political convictions, and had gone on balloting in the Liberal faith long after his vote had begun to promote something quite different. But Mary had all her wits about her, and all her conscience ; and had seen the old road broaden out without a thought of leaving it. For one thing, it seemed far more full of sign-posts to her, in connection with her millions, than the other ; and to a person carefully on the look out for such indications this was important.

There, for example, she had found the Gommies, Clarence and Esther Gommie, sign-posts which flew standards, invited subscriptions, wrote, agitated, lived for the ends of collectivism. In an age more intolerant it is hard to say whether the Gommies would have suffered at the stake or lighted the faggots ; either way they would be fierce, pale, uncompromising slaves of the single idea. They went very little into the world, but sat austere behind a single poplar in a newly town-planned district, where Clarence had more than once served on Royal Commissions. Esther played no public part, content to be recognised as the power behind her very useful husband—perhaps a little more widely recognised than the facts justified ; but so it was. Mrs. Pargeter, for inspiration and advice, had sometimes gone to them behind the single poplar. But on this occasion, having matter to communicate, Mr. and Mrs. Gommie

had left their encumbered desks and sought her out on a Wednesday afternoon in Arlington Street.

If it had been possible to disconcert the Gommies, they would have suffered something like it upon their arrival. They had come purposely early, and were informed that Mrs. Pargeter would be in presently, an assurance which Miss Woollen repeated when they entered the drawing-room. Miss Woollen, whom they knew well, was Mrs. Pargeter's marvellously capable secretary, and they found her in an attitude of attention beside a desk, a pretty inconvenient ormolu desk, at which Mr. Walter Norreys, with all the air of makeshift, was cramping his elbows to write. The only other occupant of the room was Percy Acourt, who walked up and down in the plain act of ceasing to suggest. It was a situation which required explaining, and no explanation was forthcoming. What Mr. Norreys was so intimately writing did not transpire, nor what Captain Acourt was even more intimately thinking, nor why Miss Woollen should be waiting for the joint result ; nor could it be more than suspected that both Norreys and Acourt had been lunching and thereafter given freedom and hospitality for conference. On the single other occasion which had brought Mr. and Mrs. Gommie to Arlington Street, the only suspicious character in the room, from their point of view, had been the Archbishop of Canterbury. Disconcertment, however, was not possible to either of these very influential people.

Mrs. Gommie bowed with grave distance to Norreys, whom she had once encountered in his office, and sat down, with an air of detachment, upon one of the remoter sofas. Gommie, with his arms crossed behind his sturdy back, inspected a picture. After an instant's hesitation Norreys gathered up his slips and gave them to Miss Woollen, put a finger upon the electric bell and asked for a taxi, following the footman to the stairs. Miss Woollen disappeared; Acourt went to a further window, where, with his back to the inner scene, he surveyed the dripping October afternoon; and presently Mary came in.

At once the room, with all its luxurious equipment, with the Gommies at one end and Percy Acourt at the other, seemed to contain only Mrs. Pargeter. Objects near her dwindled and ran to her as to a focus; persons, even such persons as the Gommies, became incidental. It was the most unconscious domination, an effect of simple, natural, intrinsic importance. To explain it there was only a moderately tall woman, with a kind manner and gentle, inquiring eyes, who never, it seemed, could have been quite youthful, quite irresponsible and light-hearted, but whose grave beauty was still untouched by time. Her figure seemed a sort of vase for her beauty, which held it royally, and if here and there the potter's lines had lost some of their delicacy they were still firm and fine.

Her face in its symmetry was one to take all together; you could not say that her level eyes under their fine arches were supreme in it, or

pick out any trick or irregularity to set a value upon. The pleasure to be found in it was evenly distributed. The dispassionate critic might foresee that if ever the nose reddened it might seem a trifle Roman ; meanwhile he must confess that it was a fine feature. The lips, for all their calm, were full and sweet ; and if their droop had been plaintive instead of patient, would have been irresistible. Mrs. Pargeter wore graceful pictorial clothes, and hats which vaguely reminded one of the Empress of Austria on horseback ; and though she paid the smallest possible attention to the commands of fashion, she gave pains and thought to her appearance. It was one of the things women loved her for, that she, so great, never showed herself superior to clothes. This afternoon, for instance, she wore a mouse-coloured velvet and Spanish silver lace and a big hat with a feather, and nobody could have looked better in them.

Mrs. Pargeter came in hastily ; and in her affectionate welcome to Mr. and Mrs. Gommie there was just a hint of embarrassment. Percy Acourt, approaching leisurely from the other end of the room, held out his hand in a farewell which rather pointedly excluded the chance of introduction. Mary turned perturbed eyes upon him, and he said, as if in reply :

“ I may ask you for a late cup of tea.”

It was then hardly four ; and there was as yet no sign of Horace Walpole's urn. At his reference to it, however, Mrs. Pargeter's immediate difficulty, whatever it was, seemed to fade.

"Do," she said quietly, and in that prospect turned again to Mr. and Mrs. Gommie.

"Shall we sit down?" she said. Leland Pargeter himself sometimes half instinctively waited for Mary to ask him to sit down.

"Dear Mrs. Pargeter," said Mrs. Gommie, "we have come on a most important errand."

"Most important," emphasised Mr. Gommie.

An accustomed look took possession of Mary's face, veiled, grave, judicial.

"Your Commission has not yet reported, I think."

The Gommies smiled, kindly and together, the smile they had for intelligent misapprehension.

"It was that, last time, wasn't it?" said Mrs. Gommie. "Our beloved scheme for reconstructing the asylums of the poor. No, we have not yet reported. Would you not be the first to know? This is quite a different matter."

"Quite," said Mr. Gommie.

"I am rather glad," Mary told them. "Because I am afraid I must confess to you both that I am very far from clear—With every appreciation of the scheme's nobility of motive, and every——"

Mrs. Pargeter paused. It was impossible not to pause. Mrs. Gommie had put up her hands in the attitude of prayer. She remained upright, but her expression knelt.

"Dear Mrs. Pargeter, let me beg you—*do not* feel that we are pressing you in that matter. It is the last thing we would wish to do. Indeed,

we were ashamed—positively ashamed—to bring it to your attention at all. Is it not so, Clarence ? What does the nation not owe you already ? Is it not so, Clarence ? ”

Mr. Gommie's face had lengthened at Mary's words ; anxiety sat upon it, and if he had followed his natural instinct he would have expressed some of the dismay he felt. It was for this reason, no doubt, that he had been provided with his astuter mate. Instead of blurting forth regret, he took the cue from her, and looking at the carpet, said it was so, indeed. His eye wandered, as he spoke, to the desk where Walter Norreys had been sitting.

“ The nation owes me justice and protection,” said Mary, who always answered questions to the best of her ability, “ and everything else I owe to the nation.”

“ You are generous—splendidly generous—even in thought,” cried Mrs. Gommie. “ But, Clarence, tell Mrs. Pargeter what we have come for.”

“ We have not come this time to ask for money,” Mr. Gommie began simply, “ but to lay before you a proposition of another sort, which has been maturing in the minds of some of us.”

“ We want Mr. Pargeter to stand for High Pollard,” exclaimed Mrs. Gommie, with hands again clasped. “ There has never been a chance there before ; there is now. With your influence and your husband, dear Mrs. Pargeter, we think we can win the seat.”

Mary considered, in an instant of silence, an entirely new combination of circumstances to which she lacked the clue.

"I do not think," she said, "that my husband would help to win any seat for any party. His political views are quite colourless. I have always understood that his leanings were Conservative, but indeed he is rather cynical about it all. It is ten years since I have even known him to vote."

There was a fleeting shadow of embarrassment. The Gommies looked carefully at objects well away from each other's eyes. Then Mrs. Gommie unclasped her hands and flung them out.

"People are so often shy of disclosing a political change of heart," she said; "and these deep convictions almost must mature themselves in secret. Mr. Pargeter, like every other thinker, has simply been unable to withstand the onrush of the modern social idea. You will soon learn what we already know—that Mr. Pargeter's views are in every respect what you would have them to be."

"Ask him," said Clarence Gommie genially, stroking the inside of the fat calf he had cocked over its brother—"Ask him."

Mary sat for another instant in silence. Then she said slowly:

"I should be interested, of course, to know."

"I think it is quite recent," deprecated Mrs. Gommie. "And now—could anything be more fortunate?—the Tory influence is already seriously weakened by young Tyrrell's con-

nection with that paper combine; and Sir Hugh's divorce comes in the very nick of time. The Liberals have nobody very acceptable locally, and besides, we think they can be brought to see the undesirability——”

“We think they can be squared,” said Mr. Gommie; “if not squared, squashed. But, as a matter of fact, I don't mind saying I have myself approached their head-quarters in this case. As a rule, you know, we prefer them to come to us, which they're only too pleased to do. I think there'll be no difficulty.”

“We have always counted the Tyrrells among our friends,” said Mrs. Pargeter. “I was very distressed about those horrible proceedings. The case should have been heard *in camera* for everybody's sake.”

“Oh, it was the saddest thing!” exclaimed Mrs. Gommie. “But, of course, we have to consider these matters from the standpoint of the ultimate good. And now think of the heaven-sent chance of Mr. Pargeter's turning to the new truth! Often our friends in High Pollard have said to us: ‘If Mrs. Pargeter could only stand! She leads the place morally as she owns it materially.’ That being impossible, and believing, as we always did, that Mr. Pargeter's views were opposed to yours, we have till now never dreamed that we could in any way utilise your immense influence there for the ends of progress.”

“More than that,” interrupted her husband. “The influence of the beer and whisky interests

made the place not worth looking at from our point of view till this year——”

“True, Clarence. But now the people are no longer afraid of Master Bung in politics—and the constituency is thoroughly roused. On the minimum wage you found no such response anywhere, did you, Clarence?”

“They are spoiling for a fight,” said Clarence.

“And nobody knows the heart of a constituency better than *he* does,” insisted Clarence’s wife.

“Why do you not place this matter directly before my husband?” Mary asked.

“We have already done so, and found him quite favourably disposed,” Clarence Gommie told her.

“And did he send you to me?”

This time Mr. and Mrs. Gommie looked at one another.

“We hardly got as far as the practical consideration of the campaign,” hesitated Mr. Gommie; “and Mr. Pargeter’s candidature was naturally discussed entirely upon its merits—and the merits of the cause.”

“Quite so,” said Mary thoughtfully.

“He must have known, I fancy, that you would be consulted, and probably by ourselves; but the subject was not mentioned. We are here absolutely upon our own initiative.”

Mrs. Pargeter got up and moved to the mantelpiece, where she stood fingering a porcelain shepherdess and looking at the fire. Mr. Gommie got up, too, and was gently reproved by his wife.

"Sit down, Clarence," she said. "You are making Mrs. Pargeter uncomfortable."

"Yes, do sit down," said Mary absently. "Well, it is all news to me," she went on frankly, facing them. "My husband's change of opinions, and his new interest in politics, and this proposal that he should stand. I am in a way glad to hear it. His life is rather lacking in interests, and this may prove a very great one. That is all, I am afraid, that I can say at present about it."

"Of course, it is early days," said Mr. Gommie rather blankly.

"We cannot be surprised," hinted his wife Esther, "if Mrs. Pargeter is a little taken aback by the mere suddenness of our good news, and possibly somewhat inclined to think we mistake or exaggerate Mr. Pargeter's conversion. But I have never been more certain of the completeness of anything. He confessed to me that for years he had taken exactly the cynical attitude toward all social questions that Mrs. Pargeter describes. It is only within the last month that his mind has been penetrated by the arguments and the meaning of collectivism. He is now very whole-hearted."

"That is curious," said Mary, "because—I must tell you—it is only within the last month that I have felt myself gradually approaching the political position which I have always believed my husband to occupy; and it was one of the satisfactions I hoped for, to find myself thinking with him for the first time upon certain

subjects. He knew it, too," she wondered. "I have made no secret of the fact that I was reconsidering the views which have for so long seemed to me a part of my very conscience. And at that very moment— Strange!" she murmured. "Strange!"

This time Mr. and Mrs. Gommie exchanged a full charge of consternation. It was quite unobserved. Mrs. Pargeter was lost in thought.

Mrs. Gommie was the first to recover herself.

"But, dear and honoured lady," she exclaimed, "you are not asking us to believe that your political views—that have been an example to the nation—have undergone any *change*."

"I don't think any woman's political views could be an example to the nation," Mary returned quickly. "I hardly believe, indeed, that they can matter very much. But, in so far as it is of any interest, yes. It is true that I have adopted, I think definitely, certain ideas which now seem to me better calculated to promote the good of my country than those I have hitherto accepted. Please make no mistake," she added quickly. "What I may call the policy of my life—as to the trust reposed in me—is quite unchanged. It is rather upon the general outlook——"

"Thank God for that," exclaimed Mrs. Gommie fervently; and at that moment Mrs. Pargeter was further interrupted by the powdered and rosy-cheeked effigy of the youngest of her footmen.

"Miss Pargeter," he announced.

"Your daughter," fluttered Mrs. Gommie graciously.

"My husband's daughter," Mrs. Pargeter gently corrected, and moved forward with: "Dearest Pamela, you have come to help me to-day. That is most kind."

The Gommies passed the tea-urn on the stairs. Outside it was still raining, and as Mr. Gommie opened his umbrella Mrs. Gommie took his arm for the support she felt the situation required. As they turned their steps toward Piccadilly Clarence voiced their common thought.

"We have made a bad exchange," said he; "but cheer up, comrade. We'll win High Pollard with Pargeter all the same. A woman like that can't deprive her husband of the benefit of her name."

CHAPTER VI

A SHORT soundless interval occurred between the two who were left in the drawing-room. It was covered by the arrangement of the tea-things and the presence of the servants, and it lasted less perhaps than a minute; but it was a palpable thing, behind which attitudes and possibly precautions were taken. Pamela sat down at one end of the sofa which had been occupied by Mrs. Gommie; Mrs. Pargeter swept her velvet skirts behind her and sank upon the other. Pamela crossed her legs; Mary clasped her hands. Unobtrusively, and almost as if from habit, Pamela drew the cushion from behind her and placed it at her side, where it made a comfortable elbow-rest, and something like a barrier.

"Weren't those the Gommies, Madre?" said she.

"Yes. I begged them to stay. Dear Mrs. Gommie had not broken her fast since half-past eight this morning. I could not persuade her."

"She looked wolfish," said Pamela callously. "I wouldn't trust her alone in an A.B.C. shop for five seconds."

"She said they were going later to Eustace Miles's restaurant for their evening meal, and I hope they will," Mrs. Pargeter said. "I am sure

that would be more sustaining than an A.B.C. shop. Poor Mrs. Gommie."

"Why pity her, Madre? She needn't do it?"

"No, one ought not to pity; one ought only to admire her," Mrs. Pargeter returned softly.

"I wish one could see more of people of that sort. They are the people who really matter, aren't they?"

"I don't know whether they are the people who really matter to me. I feel as if I could get on without them."

Mrs. Pargeter smiled brightly. "Ah, well, they push the world along, Pamela," she said. Then, after an instant's hesitation, and with a little effort, which was curiously sweet and humble, she added, "You have heard their wonderful news about your father. He will have told you himself, of course."

Pamela gave her an involuntary half-guilty glance.

"Is it decided then?" she asked.

"Apparently."

Pamela looked down.

"It is odd to think of papa in politics," she said.

"I would not have believed it possible, but I am assured that it is so."

"I hate it, of course. I knew he was going through a pretty strenuous time, but I hoped—What have the Gommies got to do with it?"

"Everything, it seems," escaped Mrs. Pargeter, who added hastily, "They are very in-

fluent, you know, in the party whose views your father has espoused."

Pamela took the liberty of looking rather keenly at her stepmother. The inference was as unmistakable as it was significant, but she followed it with caution.

"Then the other thing is true, too?"

"What other thing, dearest Pamela?"

"That you have—gone over."

Mrs. Pargeter sighed. "I suppose so," she said. "I must face it, put that way. One should not, of course, shelter one's self behind one's sex; but I am rather glad to think that a woman's political views can hardly matter much. I am hoping there need be no great talk. Where did you hear of it, Pamela?"

"I had a hint," said Pamela calmly, "from Percy Acourt."

A sudden new intelligence sprang between them with the words, an understanding that declared and challenged. Ignored by both, it stood in their eyes as they looked at one another; and it drew over Mary Pargeter's face a strange, painful, travelling flush.

"Ah, yes, Percy might well tell you," she said. "He had a very great deal to do with bringing it about, putting one in touch with the minds that really control, I believe, the fortunes of the country. I feel most grateful to him for these new friends, and the wonderful vistas of political thought they have opened for me. One gets so into the way of plodding along with the old accepted theories, forgetting that

the world of the mind is alive and forever changing——”

She had talked down her blush, and she conquered it with a final smile.

“Well, Pamela, you, at least, may congratulate me, since I have come, in so many matters, to your way of thinking.”

She had talked down more than her blush. Something deeper was commanded, too; and her words and smile to Pamela were at once brave and timid with affection. She leaned a little toward her stepdaughter as she spoke.

Pamela laughed, not quite comfortably, and plumped out the sofa-cushion.

“Oh, my way of thinking! That’s of no great consequence. I can’t help wondering,” she adventured, “why the Gommies should have come to you about—about papa’s candidature.”

It was then Mrs. Pargeter who turned upon her stepdaughter a full, gentle, and somewhat disconcerting gaze.

“I imagine they thought I would be interested in anything that happened in High Pollard,” she said.

“I—I suppose you would,” murmured Pamela, as the footman announced three persons in rapid succession, and she was left to note, from her sofa corner, that one of them was the ex-Prime Minister.

“They are losing no time,” she said to herself; and before half an hour had passed it became plain that “they” were not. Mr. Calthorpe was an old friend who had brought his homages

to Arlington Street on the Wednesdays of many seasons, but when he was followed by Lord Aston, Secretary for Foreign Affairs in the last Cabinet, and the brilliant Mrs. Rimington, passionate advocate of Conservative votes for women, Pamela began to wonder uneasily where this public taking possession of the surrendered fortress would cease. In an hour's time there was a good showing of old adherents—the editor of the *Liberal*, Lady Garside, whose husband had seriously reduced Mr. Calthorpe's majority in his own borough in the North, the venerable Lambert Jacob, distinguished jurist and Privy Councillor, the Lord Chief Justice and Lady Simmons, Ashley Venn, Chancellor of the Exchequer, whose allegiance, based on his official indebtedness, no conceivable set of circumstances doubtless ever could or would disturb. But the political atmosphere of Mrs. Pargeter's drawing-room had changed. There was a thrill, a ripple, in its usual tranquillity; bubbles foamed in corners, here and there a laugh betrayed a note of confidence in quite a new and wrong person. There was the exultation of battle in what had been an old, entrenched, withdrawn position. Pamela noted, with a flash of amusement, that Mr. Calthorpe was talking from the hearthrug. Only the triumphant invaders seemed quite to understand the situation; but a suspicion of it had travelled. A tendency to cleavage was noticeable among the others, and the conversation of one or two groups had a certain grave and private air. It was odd

that the tale of Mary's change of heart should have reached Ashley Venn in Mrs. Pargeter's own drawing-room. Lady Garside it was who confided it to him, in the delightful embrasure from which they looked together upon the umbrellas scurrying across the Green Park, and he met her raised eyebrows with a smile of better information.

"I admit it would be picturesque, if it were true, but it isn't," he said, "and it will take me the shortest possible time to prove it to you."

"My information is good," said Lady Garside, "but Monsieur le Ministre, of course, may have better."

"Pargeter is going to stand for High Pollard in January," Venn told her.

"So *he* has brought her over! Incredible!"

"Quite incredible. He's not standing in the Tory interest. They have no use for him, as far as I have ever heard. It's a State Labour nomination."

"If you are asking me to believe that she has brought *him*——"

"I am asking you to believe nothing but that the local committee has accepted him, and that he will be formally adopted by his constituents next Saturday night," said Venn. "Scance, the Whip, told me so himself this morning. The place has gone Tory lately, but there are a lot of new industries, and he thinks they can bring it off—with Pargeter—if we let them have it to themselves."

"Meaning, of course, with her," mused Lady

Garside. "And shall you let them have it to themselves?"

"One never knows what the local fellows will consent to," Venn told her; "and I don't pretend to say what view will be taken at headquarters, but I should think it quite possible that terms might be made."

Lady Garside continued to wonder. She was one of those bright little energetic organising women, with masterful knuckles, during campaigns, on the doors of the poor.

"It's too extraordinary," she said. "Leonard Field told me that she had made herself responsible for three millions towards their agricultural banks scheme as soon as they want it."

"On what conditions?" asked Venn sharply.

"I didn't hear the conditions, and wouldn't have understood them if I had. And now the husband is contesting a Labour seat! How do you explain it? If I'm wrong, what is Aston doing here? Did you ever meet him in this house before?"

"The Marchioness of Dawlish," announced the footman, and Lady Garside's glance sought her companion's with a shock of confirmation. Lady Dawlish was the wife of the Opposition leader in the Lords, and her political tradition was Brahmin in its exclusiveness.

"Never before!" murmured Lady Garside, with excitement, as the distinguished figure in black advanced into the room. "And the first time anywhere, I am pretty sure, since the son's death. Now will you believe me?"

"If it were anybody but Lord Lossel's daughter," returned the Chancellor of the Exchequer, with a thoughtful hand on his moustache, "and — you can't imagine her abandoning Pargeter, can you?"

"Oh, as to abandonment——" Lady Garside's eyes were eloquent.

"Yes, I know. But it's unthinkable—simply not in her character," said Venn, who was a person of simple domestic traditions, with a stout and worshipping wife.

From where they stood they could see Mrs. Pargeter moving, with a slightly heightened colour, among her guests. Venn's eyes followed her, calculating and considering.

"She's a great woman," he said. "She could not make herself ridiculous. There's nothing in it, Lady Garside,"

As he spoke Lady Flora Bellamy was announced.

"More evidence?" he asked, smiling.

"Oh, no. She doesn't count. Except possibly——"

"Except possibly?"

"Well," said Lady Garside, "she might count as an influence."

"In the domestic situation," said Venn intelligently. "But is there anything in that?"

Lady Garside looked at him quizzically.

"Anything in the domestic situation?" she repeated. "Very little, I have always understood."

"Mr. Venn, who was unused to innuendo upon feminine lips, reddened a little.

"Anything in the yarns one hears about Pargeter and Lady Flora?" he said bluntly.

"Nothing at all, I should say. But Mrs. Pargeter may think otherwise; and it just flashed upon me that that might add to any political rupture in this house. But it further flashes that the idea is absurd. Look at them now."

Venn looked, and saw Lady Flora—graceful, slim, affectionate — caressing Mrs. Pargeter's hand.

"They seem on the best of terms," he said; and as his companion drifted away from him he bent his step toward the two.

Mary made a place for him, presenting him to Lady Flora, who looked at him with a little piquant air of hostility mingling with her deference. "My precious two minutes," it seemed to say. Mary was very gracious to Venn, but as Lady Flora made a movement to leave them she put out a detaining hand.

"Not yet, dear," she said. Lady Flora had not had her two minutes, and should not be deprived of them, nor was it necessary that the Right Honourable Mr. Venn should have even one to himself. That, with the habit of distributing minutes, might have been drawn from the gesture.

"It is too long since we have seen you," she said to Venn.

"It is much too long since I have been able to come," he replied. "But I had to bring my congratulations to-day."

“Congratulations?” She hesitated.

“Not quite unmixed, perhaps; but even below the gangway Mr. Pargeter will be an acquisition. And what you have so well begun”—he smiled at her—“perhaps we will be able to finish.”

“Ah, Mr. Pargeter’s conversion!” cried Lady Flora. “Isn’t it dramatic? After all these years of just taking notes and making up his mind, won’t he be a force!”

It filled the instant in which Mary found her quiet reply.

“But I, you know, have had nothing to do with that, Mr. Venn.”

“I must not contradict you, but you will accept my congratulations all the same.”

He eyed her shrewdly as he spoke, and his glance penetrated to some reserve of dignity in Mary.

“You are very kind,” she said. “Have you had any tea? Lady Flora, I know, has not.”

“Nor have I,” said Captain Acourt behind her. “Not a drop; and it’s after six. My state is pitiable.”

The men nodded to one another. Ashley Venn for an instant stood his ground, and measured the assurance in the other’s voice. At the advent of Acourt an intelligence had appeared in the eyes of Lady Flora, quite different from that with which she had been appraising Leland Pargeter’s political future. It was a subtle, sentimental intelligence, straight from Lady Flora’s heart. Her glance at Mrs. Pargeter was

full of sympathy and discretion, and she waited her chance.

“ Ah, well, Percy,” said Mary, “ that you know, in this house, is your own fault. We cannot really undertake to discover *your* wants.”

It was decisive, almost forcibly decisive, as to the claims of the two men. Her effort after nonchalance gave the words even a touch of roughness. Acourt, aware of all that they carried, smiled with something rather like arrogance, and folded his arms. If a coat-sleeve could express privilege, it was plain. Lady Flora saw her opportunity.

“ We have been treated with far more politeness, haven’t we, Mr. Venn ? And I consider that I have been placed in your hands. And please, I want some tea quite as badly as Captain Acourt does.”

The Chancellor of the Exchequer bowed with a gallantry that was a trifle forced ; and Lady Flora led the way to the inner drawing-room, where the urn of Horace Walpole still hissed. There was an instant’s silence between Captain Acourt and Mrs. Pargeter. Acourt was master of the silence, and continued to finger his moustache. Wherever he went he was a person to look at twice ; his figure carried extraordinary significance. Sometimes, as now, he had the air of not troubling to supplement it by conversation. His eyes alone appeared to be at Mrs. Pargeter’s service. They rested curiously upon a quaint old emerald buckle which clasped her dress in the bosom.

Mary's followed the figure of Ashley Venn, and if she had spoken her impulse she would have expressed something like compunction in his dismissal ; but a stronger feeling held her silent. She would say no word that could remind the man beside her of what she had done at his persuasion, nothing that would hint a claim for consideration or a wish for praise. Not that her carriage was so proud, but it was too important to her that his opinion of her should be unvexed by such littleness. Nobody's opinion of her had ever been of consequence before to Mary Pargeter. It had always been her opinion of her fellows that mattered. This necessity to stand well with another human being shook the foundations of her world. She looked round now for a chair as if she felt them shaking, and when she spoke one might have thought she grasped at something to say.

"Lady Flora is looking charming this afternoon."

Acourt bowed ceremoniously. He had no enthusiasm to express about Lady Flora, nor did the circumstances warrant dissent.

"Mrs. Ashley Venn is not here, I think," he observed.

"No ; she never comes. I don't think I know her. Ought I to ? "

"Oh, I think you ought. She's a very intelligent woman, a little over-instructed perhaps, but that's so common. And of great use to him," Acourt added thoughtfully.

"What a pleasure that must be—to be of great

use to anyone with whom one is in sympathy," said Mary, and, though it was a simple thing to say, Acourt's face suddenly sheathed itself. He seemed to revolve what she had said in all its bearings; and when he replied, though his eyes were appreciative, he spoke with precaution.

"I should prefer to serve a cause," he said. "Then one wouldn't be burdened with gratitude."

"A cause—oh, yes!" said Mary, who knew so much about that satisfaction; but the suggestion depressed her, and Lady Flora, who remained within eyeshot, murmured to herself, "Can she possibly know how little she conceals it?"

Lady Dawlish approached to take her gracious departure; the editor of the *Liberal* followed her, and an emancipated Turkish princess, canvassing England in the cause of the harem. Acourt withdrew a step or two, hovering on the edge of these farewells; and when they were done she found the courage to say to him:

"You have heard that Leland proposes to stand for High Pollard in the Labour interest?"

"Yes," he said. "It makes an appalling complication."

She looked at him directly.

"Does it?" she asked. "Why?"

He bit his moustache and looked down, meditating his reply as he always did with her; and she waited for it as one waits for matters of the last importance.

“It is impossible to suppose that your attitude will not be prejudiced,” he said.

“I cannot accept that. Why should my attitude be prejudiced? He did not”—she hesitated—“he did not even tell me himself.”

“Oh, if that’s your view, it’s splendid!” Acourt replied absently. Pamela was crossing the room to them. He stepped back further than ever while she embraced her stepmother, with the hand upon his moustache that seemed to cover so many of his designs; and it was not until Pamela was well caught in a mesh of last words on her way to the door that he himself said good-bye to Mrs Pargeter. Their escape together was probably unnoticed by everyone else in the room.

CHAPTER VII

FOR many years Leland Pargeter had spoken too slightly of his political opinions. No doubt he considered himself mainly a man of letters and of temperament, a spectator of life, to whom such views were mere impediments. Nevertheless, he spoke of them too slightly, from the point of view of their value to himself. Leland's political opinions had for years an unsuspected value to him from the fact that they were different from his wife's. There he retreated from her, there he was independent of her, there he could even express a kind of legitimate hostility to much that she did. It was the last refuge of his self-respect, and he liked it to be talked about, though he had always been too indolent to make it conspicuous.

When Mary began to reconsider her political position, Pargeter instinctively began to reconsider his. He took fright at the prospect; it was intolerable to him that this privileged disagreement should be withdrawn. As a rule Mary allowed no disagreements; she had a way which irritated him beyond degree, of accepting everything he made a point of. She had a gentle temper and a liberal mind; when she found an

inch of common ground she hastened to assent ; at worst, with a reflective look, she let things pass. This was true of every sort of comment upon life that came up between them except the political. There she showed an inherited respect for the man's view, claimed almost with apology her right to differ, and made no humiliating attempt to bridge the gulf between them. On his side of the gulf Leland felt, as he did hardly anywhere else in the world, secure from her superiority. It was with positive dismay that he saw her making her way round, as it were, by the main land, to a place beside him. His annoyance quite superseded the interest he might otherwise have felt in seeing her do it so undisguisedly under the chaperonage of Percy Acourt.

So when she arrived she found him again confronting her across a chasm of principle. His guides were polyglot ; he justified himself liberally in French, German, and Italian, though he need not do it here. These authorities, no doubt, helped usefully to cover his tracks, and perhaps disguised even from himself the real motive power that sent him to entrench himself in his new position, and even, by way of preventing all mistake, to run up a red flag on the watch-tower. Perhaps Pamela suspected ; perhaps she was even sure. Her father was as clear to her as any dear old romance that her mind had outgrown. But to everybody else, including himself, Pargeter was politically born again. He had gone through the crisis of his life, such a

crisis as he thought himself lucky, in his disillusioned middle age, to experience. He knew the pleasure of taking himself seriously for the first time in many years.

The importance the matter had for him is plain in the reticence that left Mary to hear of it from outsiders. His own world knew of the change that was being accomplished in his views ; but his own world had hardly a point of contact with Mary's except the odd one of Lady Flora, who behaved to Mrs. Pargeter as if Leland did not exist, and Pamela, whose conduct was always too much influenced by the fact that he did. Common propriety dictated that he should tell his wife of his candidature before she should discover it from the newspapers ; but in leaving it to the Thursday before his introduction to his prospective constituents, Pargeter showed himself willing to run even this risk. As a matter of fact, the announcement was lying in the *Daily Chronicle* on the floor beside her, when he came into her morning-room, though she happened not to have seen it.

Mary looked up from her letters in surprise when he opened her door at ten o'clock. Her own breakfast had the punctuality of her board meetings ; Leland's was served in his room when he rang a bell. He never lunched, and for days together they met only, and not often, at dinner. The last time he had sought her out in her morning-room had been to explain his grounds for thinking Pamela not unreasonable in proposing an establishment of her own. He came

then with the same air of being, for the moment, content with the world.

Mrs. Pargeter looked up with surprise, but put down her pen with placidity.

“ Good morning,” she said. “ I hope nothing is wrong.”

“ Wrong ? Why should anything be wrong ? ” He could seldom prevent himself from repeating her words and traversing them. He closed the door behind him with a slightly awkward movement, and walked to the fireplace, looking, with a preoccupied and casual air, at a letter which he had in his hand. If any gesture, action, or attitude of his seemed to him to diminish his wife’s importance he used it instinctively. He continued to look at the letter, as he spoke, instead of at her.

“ This may interest you,” he said. “ It is from young Gates. I have been able to find some work for him.”

“ Really ? Alfred Gates, you mean, who had charge of the Men’s Club at Sedgeley ? Excellent ! I was particularly sorry when the club had to close with the brewery, chiefly, of course, because I thought it was a useful influence, but also on account of Alfred.”

“ I thought you would be glad to know that he had a job. My agent has taken him on in charge of the committee room at Sedgeley. The local people recommend him, and his club experience ought to put him in touch.”

He waited for some exclamation or inquiry from her ; but after an instant’s pause, in which,

no doubt, she surveyed his way of making his announcement, she only said, "I am very glad."

"Would you care to see his letter? The poor devil seems grateful."

Mary shook her head.

"Thanks—no," she said, with a smile. "It is you who have incurred his gratitude; you must keep it."

Pargeter looked at her undecided, ready to take offence; but the glance she gave him in return was so open that he restored the letter to his pocket, and produced another, which he did not immediately take out of its envelope.

"I am led to suppose that you have heard of my being asked to stand for High Pollard."

"Oh, yes—yesterday. It wasn't a secret, I hope?"

This was neither ruse nor irony on Mary's part; but Pargeter laughed as if it had been both. So we read the nature of others by our own candle.

"No," he said, "these things get about. Well, I have consented. I was accepted by the local executive on Tuesday. But perhaps you know that, too?"

"People are naturally interested," said his wife. "You must expect them to talk."

Leland folded the letter in two and put it behind his back. The gesture said he had decided not to refer to it.

"I hope you were not surprised to hear that I intended to stand in the Labour interest," he said.

"I think I was—at first. But change of opinion is so much in the air nowadays," replied Mary equably, "that I ought not to have been."

Her tone was so quiet and so detached that Pargeter gave her for the first time a glance with a little uneasiness in it. For fourteen years, after all, he had known where to find her. For fourteen years she had been, after all, the foundation of his world, unacknowledged, undesired, but there. He knew, too, that she was actually responding to new laws, but the lurch under his feet was disconcerting.

"We have never talked politics much," he said, "but while I believe you now look at certain economic and imperial questions from another point of view, I have not supposed—I have taken for granted that your attitude toward social problems was the same."

He had taken this for granted, but he suddenly wanted to be assured; it was the lurch that made him say it. He felt a need to apologise, to retrieve his ground, to grasp at things. The lurch robbed him of an instant's dignity.

"My interest in them is the same," said Mary.

Pargeter looked relieved. "I have been thinking," he said, straightening himself, "that it would be a good thing to reopen that club."

He had not come into the room proposing to suggest that Mary should reopen it. The push was sending him further that he meant to go. His expectation probably was that Mary should herself propose to reopen it, though he would not have admitted that even to himself.

“It would be a popular thing,” said Mary, and said no more.

“The place had been run, I find, on absurdly expensive lines,” said Pargeter irritably. “Tyrrell gave them a gymnasium equipment which cost one hundred pounds alone, and the coffee-room expenditure was the sort of thing one might expect in Pall Mall. There was no earthly need for a billiard-table, and I should not advise the purchase of another.”

“It does not sound essential.”

Pargeter gave her a half-furtive glance.

“I have just heard from my agent,” he said, “a man named Drake — an outsider — you wouldn’t know him. The reopening of the club — to be worked on semi-proprietary lines — is one of the things he suggests, but that is of no special consequence. I shall probably do it” — he threw out his chest — “but the matter is hardly yet ripe for discussion. I do not know why I mentioned it. His letter is mainly taken up with the unavoidable expenses, what might be called the legalised expenses, of contesting the seat.”

He laid stress on the word “legalised” as if the word was likely to commend itself.

“Registration, agents’ charges, cost of hiring committee-rooms, speakers, and so forth. They come to much less than I expected,” he went on, and there was in his tone just a hint of expecting approval.

“As to what might be called optional expenses, posters seem to eat up more than anything.

Those pictorial things apparently cost like the devil."

"But how clever they are," interposed Mrs. Pargeter.

"Clever enough, as you say, very often. But mere cleverness, mind, is thrown away in those things. It's folly to pay for it. Sentiment and farce, yes, as much as you like. The cheaper and the broader and the further from the facts the more effective, apparently, with the sort of fellow that stands with his hands in his pockets staring at them. Sentiment and farce for the depressed classes, and keep the cartoons for the *Westminster Gazette*."

He instructed her with fluency, as one who gains his point; but Mary stuck in the middle.

"The facts are usually serious enough," she remarked.

"Oh, yes; but one must get the power to deal with them as best one can," Leland replied readily. "However, as I say, posters and literature and these slap-you-on-the-back fellows to talk to school-house audiences are the chief things one is allowed to pay for, as far as I can make out, beyond personal expenses. They compel one to account for every farthing in the returns apparently." He brought the letter from behind his back and scanned it. "But no doubt that is as well."

"I fancy it is very necessary," said his wife.

Leland restored the letter to an inside pocket. His eye debated the nearest chair, and refused it. He was more master of the situation on the

hearthrug. The room seemed lower in temperature ; Mary sat in it gravely waiting, it seemed, for anything more he might find to say. Pargeter stiffened himself, and looked at his watch.

"The State Labour Party," he said, with an unconscious lift of the lip, "holds itself responsible for the unavoidable election expenses of some of its candidates, but would hardly contemplate doing so, I imagine, in such a case as mine."

"Hardly, I should suppose. I have always thought that unavoidable cost should be borne by the State itself," replied Mary. "If you are returned," she went on simply, "you will have an opportunity of advocating such a reform."

It was the most unconscious parrying, void of intention, the result, no doubt, of years of the necessity of defence, but Pargeter took it home.

"There is no need of offensiveness on your part," he told her, whitening. "I was about to say that for this reason, which will no doubt commend itself to you, I have decided to draw elsewhere against the demand I shall have to meet."

She looked at him in silence, waiting ; and he drew himself up majestically for the pronouncement he had to make.

"You are aware, I think"—his tone was dry and lecturing—"that for the past six years the annual sum which you have been good enough to place at my personal disposal has remained untouched."

If Mrs. Pargeter winced the slight inclination of her head did not show it.

"That sum, owing to the generosity which I hasten once more to acknowledge, is now a considerable one, and in proposing to have recourse to it as the basis of my political career, if I am privileged to have one, I assume that I am acting as you would wish me to do."

A slight change came over Mrs. Pargeter's face as she listened, a kind of barometric reading sent up from some depth of financial intelligence in her almost automatically.

"I could have no possible objection," she said, "but I am afraid you will find that the money is not there."

"Not there?"

"You will remember that the arrangement was made to cover your current expenditure only; and it was understood that to prevent useless accumulation any sum undrawn at the end of our financial year should revert to capital account. It is considered a sound principle, I believe, in budgetting for recurring expenditure, though I am sorry if it works out to your inconvenience at the moment. I am glad to be able to tell you," she went on deprecatingly, "that the money has been invariably absorbed in the end in social schemes which I am sure you would now approve; but I fear you will find only the amount for the current year available."

Mary looked very gravely concerned, but there was nothing in her face to indicate that a ledger transaction could be anything but final. Par-

gether stared at her for an instant and burst into a rather forced laugh.

“By God, you are impayable! May I ask the precise date upon which the banking concern to which I have the honour to be married winds up its annual accounts?”

“March the thirty-first. I am really sorry, Leland.”

He searched his person for a pencil and made rather an ostentatious note of it.

“I shall not scruple to take immediate advantage of that information.”

“It has always been at your disposal.”

“You have taken good care not to remind me of it. I looked in this morning, as a matter of fact, to give you some idea of my grounds for identifying myself with the present social movement; but we seem to have wandered from the subject.”

He thrust his hands in his pockets and looked about him as if to recapture his strayed intentions.

“Your eternal preoccupation of money wrecks every other consideration,” he said irritably, looking not at her but near her on the floor.

“One thing, however, I remember my desire to mention, with regard to the coming campaign. I find the law so suspicious in the direction of undue influence that, in view of your large vested interests in and about High Pollard, I think it as well to deprive myself in advance of any efforts you might be inclined to make there on my behalf. Pamela, as regards canvassing and so forth, may do as she likes; but I must insist

that you will show yourself as little as possible in the neighbourhood until after the election is over."

Leland's eye was bright and his cheek flushed. He spoke with an immense effect of retrieving, at a blow, all his damaged self-respect. Mary, with her chin on her hand, heard him out, and a faint smile flickered across her face at the end; but it was rather at her own expense than at his. There was a moment of silence while he, who knew her so well, waited to be calmly set right, and reassured, and shown what was reasonable and proper, as ever.

"I think your fears are groundless," she told him; "but in any case they are irrelevant. I had no intention of interfering in your interests. I could not."

"And, pray, why not—if one may ask? It seems a natural thing, after all, that you should 'interfere in my interests,' as you so charmingly put it. New convictions?" he sneered, as Mary hesitated to reply.

"Precisely," she told him, with relief. "New convictions."

"*Tant mieux*," he retorted, and the truth blurted out of him, "I rejoice to think we are still in opposite camps."

He walked to the door, but stopped there to demonstrate that anger is seldom logical.

"I congratulate the party of reaction—and Percy Acourt," he said, and went out.

Mary, left alone in the room with the ticking of the clock, sat for a long time making little

marks upon a blotting-pad. At last, as she sat, tears gathered in her eyes and rolled down her face. The need to draw out her handkerchief and wipe them away seemed to rouse her from her reverie, and without further delay she turned to her correspondence.

CHAPTER VIII

THE foggy dark of early November was lighting all the lamps and brightening all the shops, as Leland Pargeter came up the steps from the Underground Railway with the stream that eternally trickles through the arched passage, and stood for a moment at the entrance to Kensington High Street. He was looking for the particular old man from whom he liked to buy his evening paper in this place, and he had not to look long. Then he turned to a gay corner and bought a bunch of roses from a particular old woman, who added a bit of berberis for goodwill. The old man had a vinous nose and a look of better days, the old woman twinkled like a cabbage after rain; they both belonged, in Pargeter's eyes, to the *décor* of the place; and he took a pleasure in his little transactions with them. He turned to the west with the roses in his hand, and walked more lightly to Pembroke Mansions because of them. A rose had its value to Pargeter, and these were very fresh.

Emmett, in the lift, produced the conversation he had for approved visitors, and Harriet admitted him to the cramped passage of Number Twenty-Two with satisfaction. In the kitchen, wiping her hands to go to the door, she had said

to herself, "It's 'er father." She knew his touch upon the electric bell. Pamela, as she turned her head in the drawing-room, had not been so sure. The bell at this hour made only one announcement to her, and she was often mistaken.

Harriet threw open the drawing-room door, holding it firmly back against the wall, and effacing herself beside it to let him in. "Mr. Pargeter, miss," she said in a tone of congratulation, and Leland entered with the gleam of amusement in his eye that Harriet always produced.

"Oh, papa! Those for me? What loves! Please, Harriet, the green vase with the nick in it, that you always, always hide away, and some water, Harriet."

"Yes, miss. But the nick was the char's accident, miss," affirmed Harriet, and disappeared.

"Thanks, Pam," said Pargeter, dropping into a chair. "Nice of you to be quick about the water. I took some flowers to a charming but inhuman lady the other day, and she seemed passably grateful, but they wilted on a table beside her during the whole of my visit. I felt a malefactor."

"It was her natural excitement at the honour of receiving you, daddy."

"No, Pam, there was no palliation. Well, I think I shall invite you to my next meeting."

"Then it went well on Saturday night. I'm dying to hear."

"It went quite extraordinarily well. The place was packed to the doors, and not a single interruption from beginning to end. The Prime Minister couldn't have had more rapt attention."

"But did you expect them—interruptions?"

"Oh, well, even peers get heckled now, you know. And I'm not so well known in a place like Wortley End as you might imagine. It is off by itself there, and the road is infernally difficult for a motor. But it was a High Pollard audience. I recognised scores of faces."

"Any friends?"

"All friends, I hope." His tone was gently correcting. "But I felt ashamed to think how few of their hands I had ever grasped in friendship. Good honest British bourgeois for the most part, and uncommonly intelligent and appreciative. I found them outspoken, too. Old Stagg, the publican, stopped to congratulate me after the show was over. 'Well, sir,' he said, 'I have voted Tory all my life because I believe in gentlemen in politics. I can't abide cads in the 'Ouse of Commons. But if gentlemen can be found to stand for Labour, the same as what you propose to do, sir, why, they'll get my vote, and welcome.'"

Leland slapped his knee with his gloves, and turned a face full of animation upon his daughter. She thought he looked ten years younger, and smiled at the change in him.

"Then it wasn't altogether a Labour audience?"

“ Oh, Labour was present all right, in the back rows, and of course on the platform. But, no, I suppose the room was filled up by High Pollard tradespeople before the other fellows got a chance. It is rather a shy breed, you know, the British operative, especially in contact with his realised social superiors. Your mill-hand calls himself the equal of any lord, but does not rub shoulders comfortably with the village grocer. And, to tell the truth,” Leland confessed, “ I was just as well pleased that he wasn’t over-represented. I found I could talk about him a good deal more fluently in his absence.”

Pamela drew a long breath.

“ I wish you had let me come. Did Bennett introduce you to your satisfaction ? ”

“ He got me adopted to his, which was the main thing, I suppose. I didn’t hear all of what he said. I was in the next room, you know, supposed to be hiding my blushes. But, no, candidly I don’t think he did make the most of me. Upon my soul, I believe he had only heard of me in one capacity——”

He pulled up at that, and Pamela nodded sympathetically. She had not to be told in what capacity.

“ Would it not have been better to dine him first at Hareham ? ”

“ I wasn’t at Hareham myself,” said Leland quickly. “ There was reason enough. The electricians were in possession. Besides, it’s no question of dining Bennett at Hareham or any-

where else. Bennett's my political godfather, my buffer, my protector, my chairman. For the time being Bennett owns my soul. And I desire," he added, with a touch of dignity, "to disassociate myself as far as possible from Hareham for the next three months. There are more ways than one of winning an election."

"Of course there are. And you got on well. Did anybody else speak?"

Pargeter's face cleared again.

"Pam, it was like the realisation of a dream. They were absolutely with me. I held forth for three-quarters of an hour. It is extraordinary the inspiration their grey lives seem to give me. What that speech did for me politically I have no way of knowing; but it was a priceless emotional expression. Yes, the Secretary of the local Union spoke, rather apologetically, I thought, as if I were a sort of carpet-bagger—in High Pollard!—and I was seconded by the Wortley End curate, if you please, a first-rate fellow, thorough Collectivist, and the only gentleman in the room, the Reverend Boys. You may come to my next meeting, and I shall convert you. I discover myself irresistible, Pam, on the public platform."

Pamela did not return his very engaging smile, but looked seriously in front of her. The change in her father's views had often been discussed between them; but her sympathy had never been invited. Leland had been too completely taken up with his own position to think of hers. In their conversation he had rather laid his

difficulties before her, and talked himself round them, than made any attempt to win her agreement. It was only now that her agreement struck him as not altogether unimportant.

"I must get you to think with me upon these matters, Pam. There is so much that wants doing, and that you can do better than anybody."

Pamela got up, found a matchbox on the mantelpiece, and lit a cigarette. She remained standing there, with her elbow on the mantelpiece, and presently her hand crept out along the edge till it hung exactly where Percy Acourt's did when he took his favourite place in the room. Pargeter was already smoking.

"I don't think with you upon them at present, dad," she replied, and bent her head with Acourt's grave impenetrableness. It was one of the touches of comedy that the heavy things of life sometimes print as they pass.

"But you will, my dear girl. I know the academic tradition very well and how binding it is. But you will throw it off; the appeal is too strong."

"I wish I could believe in State-made millenniums, but I can't. And I wish I loved and panted for humanity in its cruder aspects, but I don't. And I wish I could see qualities in the British working-classes to make me want them to control my affairs, and those of the country, but I haven't discovered them yet, and I don't believe anybody else has."

"You are extraordinarily like your mother,"

Pargeter declared, as if by impulse. He spoke very seldom of his first wife, even to her daughter; he kept her in emotional reserve. Pamela gave him a gentle glance.

"She was as unchastened a little aristocrat as ever rode in a tumbril," said Leland, "but I often wonder whether she would have resisted the shock of the new evidence and the demand of the new logic. I don't think she would. She was very clear-witted. And her heart——" He paused. "I think she would have been beside me."

"I can't see that there is any new evidence or any new logic. The strong have always taken what they could lay their hands on. The balance of strength has shifted. That's all. It used to be the man with the arm, now it's the man with the vote. It seems we are to be pillaged this time, and we may be obliged to acquiesce. But I don't see why we should assist."

Pargeter glanced round the little room and smiled.

"I don't think you need have any immediate apprehensions, Pam."

"Do you imagine I don't pay income-tax?"

"Do you? Well, it's a privilege. I wish I did."

"But of course you do."

"No. Presumably my wife does. But they never worry me."

"Oh!" Pamela knocked her cigarette ash into the fire. "That's too hateful. But tell me more about the meeting. I once heard Bennett. He

has a kind of rough eloquence. Was he at his best ? ”

“ He didn’t waste any of it on me. But there were other aspects of my candidature that called it forth only too abundantly. Oh, yes, he was well enough. He made one bad mistake, though.”

“ Mistake ? ”

“ He said that only one circumstance marred the perfect felicity of the occasion, and that was the absence of Mrs. Pargeter from the platform. If he had stopped at that there would have been no great harm ; but he went on to ‘ hope and believe ’ that we would not have to regret her often in future. At best it was taking an enormous liberty,” said Pargeter irritably. “ That’s the worst of these half-baked fellows. And as things are it puts me in a most deplorable hole.”

“ But Madre *will* be there, I suppose ? ”

“ Why do you suppose it ? ”

“ Well, she hasn’t changed her whole position toward social reform because she now believes we ought to put a duty on French motors, has she ? She hasn’t abandoned her niche in contemporary history ? You stand for all she has ever believed in ; she is morally bound to help you all she can.”

“ Under Acourt’s influence it’s hard to say what she hasn’t abandoned,” Leland told her gloomily. “ As you say, one might have thought that the cherished beliefs of a lifetime—— But not only does she refuse me her personal weight, but she has withdrawn the financial basis of my

whole undertaking; finds it isn't there, which comes to the same thing. Oh, she is a very thorough convert. Acourt is to be felicitated."

Pamela threw her cigarette into the fire and went quickly to her little oak desk, where it courted the last of the light in the turret-corner. She opened an inner drawer and came back with a letter.

"From Mowbray this morning," she said, handing it to Pargeter; "and you are very welcome to it, daddy, for any cause you think well to champion. I haven't an atom of use for it."

"What's this? From Mowbray. Ah, I always wanted you to go to Mowbray. I hope he's done well by you. By Jove, Pam, he has. This is in advance of royalties, I suppose."

It was a cheque for five hundred pounds.

"For your quiet work, Pam," Leland went on, as she nodded, "a sum like that is very significant. You don't appeal in the least to the ordinary reader. You're caviare, my dear, and Mowbray evidently finds you very good caviare. Congratulations,"—and he handed it back to her.

"Please take it, dad."

"Impossible, dear child. Quite impossible, and I trust quite unnecessary. The worst of it is, a lot will be expected of me after—— But I can see the thing through for the present. Don't worry. Thanks all the same, and I wish I could earn as much in as fine a way. No, my dear poor Pam—your little all! How like your mother! I couldn't—I really couldn't. But of

course you could do a lot for us in the constituency."

"Canvassing, you mean. I'd so *much* rather—subscribe, papa."

"I wouldn't ask you to canvass"—he had definitely handed back the cheque—"at all events not until we had brought you round a bit. But we've practically no organisation among the women, and a lot of them are very anxious to help. I shall come out strongly for female suffrage; it's the demand of modern civilisation."

"I agree with you there," said Pamela quickly.

"I know you do. But you can imagine how intelligent the direction of it all is likely to be unless someone of reasonable education—and she will be no worse for being a lady—can be got to devote herself to it. I found tremendous expectations of your stepmother. I had to make what excuses I could."

"It's a damnable position," said Pamela. Her father looked at her curiously. Her face had sharpened into a fine hardness that he could not remember ever having seen in his first wife's.

"She's very intense," he reflected, "I suppose she gets it from me."

"If your stepmother had performed this volte-face unaided it would have been less damnable," he replied; "but I confess I object to Acourt's ascendancy. He's the most reactionary type I know, and he seems in complete control of her mind."

“The postman,” said Pamela, as the sound of the electric bell in the kitchen struck through. To emphasise her indifference to the postman, she picked up another cigarette, but it trembled in her fingers. The door opened, not quite all the way, to admit the head and upper portion of Harriet, looking even more discreet than usual.

“Captain Acourt, miss,” she said, and withdrew.

Leland was on his feet, looking at his watch, before the door had closed again. He was fastidious in the indulgence of his personal dislikes. He simply vanished before them.

“How are you, Acourt?” he said. “Sorry I must be off, Pam. I have an appointment at six.”

“Must you, papa? Good-bye, then. I will go down to High Pollard to-morrow”—she spoke with a suspicion of over-clearness. Certainly Acourt could not help hearing—“and take rooms with Mrs. James. It will be better to be in the town. I will go straight to your committee-room and see Drake first, I suppose—put myself under his orders. He will know best how to make use of me. Good-bye!”

CHAPTER IX

“ I AM to take my first lessons in electioneering,” said Pamela, as the door closed upon her parent. “ It ought to be interesting. I hope I shall not be too expensive a pupil. It must be easy to do more harm than good.”

Acourt looked grave, surprised, and annoyed. She perceived this, and drew reinforcement from it. She meant him to feel grave, surprised, and annoyed, even wounded and sorely hurt. Like most women who would be kind, she could be cruel first. Besides, he had hurt her so often ; he was hurting her all the time. Harriet, arriving for instructions as to fresh tea, made an opening for a gay pretence that he would be indifferent to what he heard.

“ And shall I toast another muffin, miss ? ”

Pamela lifted the cover of the empty dish.

“ Please, Harriet. My father has eaten every crumb of the last one. That was either very thoughtless or very hungry of him, wasn't it ? ”

“ P'raps a little of both, miss,” said Harriet, with an air of intellectual adventure with the enemy in force, and swooped primly upon the dish.

“ Isn't she a dear ? ” Pamela demanded, and got up to put her publisher's letter back into her

desk. "She will do anything in the world for me, but never, never, never can I hope to have the last word."

Acourt smiled absently. He looked weary, his face was blocked in shadows. His eye followed her every movement; his glance was like a bird that is tired of the wing and lacks the confidence to alight and rest. When it met hers it returned to the fire, as if she were a fowler with a snare.

"So you are to canvass High Pollard in the Socialist interest," he said.

"I am to be let off canvassing for the present. The candidate isn't satisfied about my qualifications." Pamela laughed shortly. "But I am to do anything else that I may be found capable of—in my father's interest."

"I see. Am I to assume that your imagination has been captured—like his?"

"I'm afraid you mustn't assume anything, except that I am his daughter."

Acourt slightly lifted his eyebrows. His face was so heavy, and ordinarily so impassive, that the common movements of expression made remarkable changes in it. When he lifted his eyebrows one got a view of what interested him, and his smile unfettered a charm in him.

"I certainly won't assume that you are not convinced of the righteousness of your cause."

"There is so much righteousness, isn't there," she parried, "in every cause."

"And so much sophistry," he retorted.

"Ah, here's tea! You have been quick with that muffin, Harriet."

“ I had a good bit of fire, miss.”

“ And now you must hand Captain Acourt his tea, Harriet,” Miss Pargeter went on, pouring it out. “ He has been working very hard for us all for hours and hours in the House of Commons, and we can’t let him wait on himself, can we ? ”

Harriet stood to attention, tray in hand, plainly cogitating a suitable response, and caught at the last available instant to say, “ No, miss, not in that case, miss, certainly.”

This time Acourt had no smile ready. He was clearly not to be rallied on the subject of his work in the House of Commons in the presence of a little servant-maid ; and he took the cup from her with such an absence of geniality that she almost scuttled from the room. Pamela observed him quietly. Her passion was quite free of illusions. Sometimes she excelled in her clear sight of him. In the end it seemed to promise deliverance ; and deliverance, no doubt, was what she most wanted.

“ You spoil her,” he said, looking after Harriet.

“ Never in the world ! I couldn’t. She is not susceptible,” laughed Pamela, “ to any process. That’s what’s so unique about her, why she’s such a treasure. Neither Babylon nor the waters thereof could effect any change in her that she couldn’t take out with a little spirits and turpentine.”

There was no beguiling him, if that was her desire. He drank his tea in silence, and she

looked about her for the bit of embroidery with which she liked to occupy her fingers when he was there.

"I should be sorry that you should suppose that I don't understand your position in this matter," he began laboriously.

"I wonder if you do," she dared him; but he was not in the mood for adventures.

"These are days, of course, in which one cannot be surprised at any change of opinion. It is wonderful how old beliefs are breaking up and re-forming round the new conditions. As a race we certainly think faster than we did."

"That is exactly what my father says."

"Your father has great persuasiveness and a charming gift of words. I fear you will not be his only convert."

"Do you think he will win his election?"

"Ah! There are so many factors in that, aren't there?"

She looked at him steadily, but her heart beat hard as she said, "You have removed one of the most important."

He glanced at the roses her father had left, taking their pretty cover to place himself on guard.

"Is that a reproach?"

Pamela reflected. "No. It's the statement of an interesting fact."

"I can't allow it as a reproach. Mrs. Pargeter's change of attitude was accomplished—I am proud of my share in it—before your father made his interesting intention known.

Besides, it is only fair, isn't it, that having lost him we should gain her ? ”

Pamela's smile was half tender, half ironical. “ Poor papa ! ” she said, and then added quickly, “ You mean that if my father had announced his decision earlier you would not have tried to influence her ? ”

“ I would have refrained, I think, from doing anything to place her in the difficult position she now occupies.”

Pamela took it with barely the quiver of an eyelid. She might by this time have been accustomed to the quick, hard blows with which he met her tentatives at some shred of reassurance from him ; but she could not cure herself of making them. She was simply to remain uninformed as to what he would have done if he had known of the complication of her father's candidature—the complication, as she longed to tell him, of a bit of her own heart—and he took the way of telling her so that seemed likely to hurt her most. It was the most curious proof in the world of how much he loved her, of how much he was afraid of her, and of how inscrutable the force was in him that held him dumb.

“ I hope she finds it difficult,” Pamela told him. “ But I think it unlikely.”

“ I know she does.”

The door opened to admit the cap of Harriet, with an unflinching expression under it.

“ Shell I take away, miss ? ”

“ Will you win our respectful approval by

finishing the second muffin, Captain Acourt ? No ? Then Harriet, you may take away."

Harriet took away with elaboration. She kept as careful a distance from Captain Acourt as if he might growl or spring ; perhaps out of the corner of her eye she saw that he was watching her with no great patience. Her mistress, who sat serenely covering the bruise in her breast, was a usurper in his imagination, which was otherwise governed by the political passion of his life. He had this racial inheritance in extraordinary measure, with everything to enhance it that could be got from dedication, training, aptitude, and ambition, with no bar to it but poverty, and none to dispute it but Pamela Pargeter ; and she had stolen her sceptre in the gentle state of pupillage. Their first contact was in the interest of public questions, and she was naturally receptive and responsive to his way of taking them. Her quick intuition made up in the beginning for her lack of knowledge ; and they were soon on terms of comradeship which it was no inconvenience to him to maintain by stooping ever so little, as a man and a practical politician. He brought her soon much more than the pending combination in the Cabinet and the fascinating last word in the lobbies ; he offered her his ideas. She was a party to his projects, she knew his opinions of men and shared his speculations upon their actions. She even had a finger in his speeches, adding to them that touch of human sympathy which it was his defect to be without.

He could not feel with other people ; he could not even feel with her. His view of means and ends was tragical, unimpeded ; he might have had Atropos for a grandmother. You saw it in his gaze, which had a directness so untroubled as to be almost primitive. Well, Pamela lent him her mind, and before he knew had his heart in exchange ; and he was plainly not yet reconciled to the unlooked-for bargain. Now, while he still reflected on the terms of it, which he was far from able to repudiate, behold her lightly withdrawing the very basis of the contract—she was at least engaged to his politics, a lighter spirit than his might have declared. It is not to be wondered at that he bent a sombre brow upon Harriet and the tea-cups.

“ I wish you had told me more about the practical work of a campaign,” said Pamela. “ I feel a delicacy about asking you now, but I am really very vaguely informed. I have a recollection of the importance of motor-cars to carry voters, and the lack of them in my father’s party. Tell me one thing. How many motors can one hire for five hundred pounds ? ”

“ One for a year, or a great many for a single occasion I should think, but none, I fear, for polling purposes. It’s not permitted. They can be lent but not hired, and not even hired to be lent.”

“ Of course—it comes back to me. Another class advantage.”

"I think it's supposed to work out to the benefit of the other side."

"It ought to be made illegal to convey anybody to the polls," declared Pamela. "If a man's sense of citizenship isn't strong enough to take him there of his own accord his vote ought to be considered not worth counting. I rather think I should tax votes; make every elector pay a small yearly sum, two-and-six, say, to keep his name on the register, the proceeds to be applied to election expenses. It's abominable to make the candidate foot what is really a public bill."

A sudden wary interest shot into Acourt's glance at her. Could this mean that her father was at a loss for funds? That was going further, much further, than he had expected of his convert. But he covered his thought immediately with a smile.

"Most attractive," he said. "But I should submit it to an expert in local feeling—say Mr. Pargeter's chairman—before going very far with it, if I were you. And as to motors, Hareham at least is well provided."

"I do not think my father proposes to avail himself to any great extent of the resources of Hareham."

Acourt's glance dropped, but she was quick enough to see the covert satisfaction in it.

"Why do you let me tell you this? You know my stepmother's astonishing position."

"Yes. But I did not know how it worked out between them," he said simply.

“It works out this way—that she will have nothing whatever to do with his candidature, though he stands for all that no political change of view can prevent from being the great purposes of her life. She gives him to understand this, when he is pledged and bound and adopted by his party and constituency, no doubt in natural reliance upon——” She hesitated, disliking what she had to say.

“One moment. Are you quite sure he told her of his intention? Was she consulted?”

Pamela reflected.

“No,” she said. “I am not sure.”

“I ask because I myself learned it in the Lobby only a few days ago, and Mrs. Pargeter had not then mentioned it to me at all. I think she would have mentioned it.”

“Among her other difficulties. Probably,” Pamela put in quickly. “He told her, I believe, last Thursday, two days before his adoption meeting.”

“That was a little late, wasn’t it?”

“No doubt it was very late. I am not defending my father. I am only explaining to you why I must help him to win his election. He has been deserted.”

Acourt looked deeply concerned. His passion sometimes seemed to hang weightily upon him, like a problem or an issue of which he had not yet mastered all the aspects. This was a new, and, his expression seemed to say, an unnecessary aspect; there had been enough before. He got up and walked to the fireplace, disposed of

his cigarette-end, and stayed there in his place, with his elbow on the mantelpiece, shading his eyes with his hand, and looking at her from under it with profound speculation. She, who would have given her world to know what he balanced there, went on with her embroidery.

"I suppose you must do what you feel to be natural," he said after a moment, "but I beg you, earnestly, not to let your mind be compromised by the sophisms which seem to have captured your father's. I should be deeply chagrined to learn that that was the case."

His use of the ponderous, last-century word was like him, and she gave it the notice of a light little smile. She acknowledged and secretly derided him always, tenderly or not, according to her humour; but in her bonds she could always mock him.

"I cannot imagine," she said, "that in any of the great problems that divide the world all the sophisms can be on one side and all the truth on the other. The issue can never be so clear as that, or there would be no social question except how much to pay the police. I've had the most expert training in the truth on one side. I shall now use my opportunity to look for it on the other. I am sure you would advise that," she added gently.

He still gazed at her moodily. He had the air of considering what she said apart from her, at all events of wishing to do that, though it must have been herself and not her words that weighed with him. She could often have

cried out at this aloofness in him, but she met it now with a smile.

"It is at least feasible to choose the side with the most truth on it," he said briefly, "and stick to it. I hope to find constancy in you."

At that she laughed gaily.

"Not so easy. No, you must be content with the permanence of your work upon the really important member of our family. She will never change."

Captain Acourt walked up to Pamela at that with his hand out. His visits were always punctiliously brief, and his departures often brusque. He would sometimes go rather than reply to her, as now. Pamela touched the bell, and Harriet appeared with the promptness of one who waits upon occasion.

"You go down to High Pollard to-morrow?" he asked.

"Yes. And I am afraid—I shall be up now and then—but not often, I imagine, till after January."

"Good-bye then," he said, and there was no need to labour the understanding that it was to be until after January.

"You continue, I hope, to feel no anxiety about Blackport?" she sent after him.

"Thank you—none at all."

"I am glad of that."

It was the last peal of her defiance, of the indifference she meant to be so glittering; and it rang bravely enough along the little passage where the door was about to close

upon him. After he had gone she moved restlessly about the room for a little, righting objects here and there; but when Harriet came in to replenish the coal-scuttle she found her mistress listless before the fire.

"In case of your going to the country, miss, shall I stop the milk?"

"Stop anything you like, Harriet. But never mind just now. I will tell you all about it to-morrow."

"Yes, miss. Then if you ain't agoin' to read, miss, had I better turn out one of the lights?"

"Turn them both out, please," said Miss Pargeter. "For a little while the fire will be quite enough."

She sat still by the fire for longer than a little while; and when she roused herself it was to say to the dropping embers.

"If anyone had been listening, how it would have seemed that we hated one another."

CHAPTER X

LELAND PARGETER'S situation, whatever it was, would always have attention from Lady Flora Bellamy, and he was quite well aware of this. He was one of her paramount interests in life; he came immediately after her personal appearance and before her personal comfort; and for her, at least, he was everything he would have liked the world to believe him. He stood to her for genius at the traditional odds with its environment, a spell which has captured many wiser minds than hers, and for a male being whose acknowledgment of her charm, though fairly constant, had always come one degree short of what the sex had taught Lady Flora to expect. As she herself would have put it, she had never really bowled him over; and it may be assumed, once for all, that she would never be happy until she had. She knew that society handed him over to her, but could never be certain that it handed him all the way. Society gave Lady Flora the benefit of the doubt; and there were moments, it must be said, when the sportswoman in her rather resented this. But Leland, so far as Lady Flora was concerned, had always left some distance between himself and any goal that

could be considered ultimate. He had avoided a serious entanglement with her, but had lent himself to the shadow of one, a shadow which was beginning to count with him for a little more perhaps than it did. The shadow had, after all, constancy, cleverness, and charm, and Leland was, after all, fifty, with baldness upon him, a settled dislike to new habits, and a cultivated fastidiousness towards new people. Lady Flora was an old habit, easy to put on and off; he had been keeping her lately more on than off.

They were dining together that evening at her club, and going on to the presentation of a censored play by a dramatic society. Leland remembered with satisfaction that he had allowed the engagement to stand in spite of the outrageous demands Bennett had already begun to make upon his time. He and Lady Flora always did censored plays together; they were members of all the associations which exist to protect this form of talent from too cruel discouragement in the interest of the public. There had been a time, before his political interest arrived, when Leland himself had hopes of being the author of a censored play. The critical scene admitted of two interpretations. The censor and his advisers took the respectable one, and the play passed to the less distinguished fate of a week's run. It was a mistake; the proper interpretation was the improper one; and Leland was probably right in believing the official judgment to be misled by the distinguished moral position which he

was compelled to share before the world. He added it bitterly to his handicap.

"I am not even allowed," he murmured, "to mean what I say"; and one or two of his intimates were detestable enough—poor Leland!—to find this diverting.

Lady Flora was waiting for him when he arrived, deep in a sofa corner of the Court Club's luxurious smoking-room. She was always waiting for him there or elsewhere; she spoiled him openly, took pride in letting him trample upon her convenience.

"It would bore me to extinction," she said, "to be forever on my hind-legs with Leland Pargeter." So she was never on her hind-legs with him, but gambolled always in his society. The deplorable Flora kept her hind-leg attitudes for Arlington Street. There, it must be admitted, she gave them a good deal of exercise.

"Bring two vermouths, Willy," she said to the page who conducted Pargeter to her presence "and, like a good boy, make up the fire. Well, so you are 'adopted,' you poor orphan! High Pollard has taken you to its heart. I hear it went quite gorgeously well. I am so glad."

"It did go well." Pargeter took the other corner of the sofa and crossed his knees with comfort. A tall woman in black who was writing near them, gathered up her furs and her letter and found a table at the other end of the room. People seemed in such ways almost to conspire to protect their intimacy. Lady Flora's eyes followed her with approval.

“It did go well; but how did you know? I meant to write, but——”

“I am much too well acquainted with you to depend upon your writing,” laughed Lady Flora. “But there is such a thing as the *North Brents Weekly Herald*, I suppose, and one could order it in advance. To say nothing of the puff they gave you in the *Beacon*. I’ve been taking in Labour papers for the last fortnight. Christine couldn’t find them at the place my *Morning Post* comes from. They were rude to her at last, so I had regularly to subscribe.”

“The ‘puff’ they gave me—the ‘puff’! Dear friend, what an expression!”

Lady Flora looked for an instant quite tragically sad.

“The wrong word again!” she cried. “One should keep a special dictionary for you! But please—you must take me and my words together; they are part of me.”

She slanted a glance as she spoke upon an outstretched hand and arm to which certainly no objection could be taken.

“On the contrary, my dear Flora, your words often seem to me to have very little connection with you,” he told her, and picked up her fan. “Words, words, words! Mechanical little contrivances, why should they be so important!”

She took it from him that he was in the best of humours, and was happy to learn that he thought anything at all about her—even that her talk was irrelevant. I am afraid,

talking of hind-legs, that Lady Flora was a spaniel.

"Well—shall—we—go—down—to—dinner?" she said, checking off the words with her fingers. "I hope there is nothing to displease Your Excellency in that."

"On the contrary, I'm very hungry."

They went down to dinner, and the hall-porter, perceiving whose rustle it was upon the stairs, left his alcove with an air of personal responsibility, and opened the door for them.

"Thank you, Chubb," said Lady Flora.

"It's nice of Chubb," she added to her companion. "He always forgets that I am no longer on the Committee. Dear Chubb."

They found the little table Flora had reserved.

"Now tell me, please," she said, "all about it—every last thing, as I heard a darling American say the other day. That's what *I'm* hungry for—news, news, news!"

"You will be good enough to eat your dinner," he told her, "or I'm blessed if I tell you anything."

She sent little affectionate submissive glances at him between the first spoonfuls of soup, glances which were at the same time proud and proprietary; and he had all the look of deserving them.

"I hadn't an instant's doubt that you would bring it off," she told him. "I had the clearest presentiment of it."

"Good Lord! I am far enough from that," he replied; but his laugh exulted in spite of him.

"Not a single hitch?" asked Lady Flora curiously.

"Do you know quite all about it?"

"I know what the papers have told me?" Lady Flora evaded.

"Then you know the *Herald* mentioned my wife's absence."

Lady Flora looked sympathetic, gentle, innocent.

"Yes, I think it did. How disappointing for her!"

"Not in the least. That admirable woman's absence was a very precise indication of her point of view."

Lady Flora's spoon paused, transfixed half-way, and she gazed over it at him with round, startled eyes.

"But—but—she can't be going to stay away *always*!"

"Why not? I have never interfered with her independence in political matters. I am not likely to begin now."

"Dear Mrs. Pargeter," Lady Flora mused. "She never talks to me about those things. I suppose she imagines I shouldn't be interested in them. But I am. Passionately. I think they are just the only things in life. I must get her to tell me all about it. But I am sorry if it makes any difference. I want you to win your election just because it is yours."

Pargeter laughed. "So I believe does Pamela. You are all most adorable when you are least critical," he said.

"Pamela *would*. But I wonder—I wonder immensely—what has changed your dear, splendid, noble wife's ideas about social reform and the duty of the State and all that sort of thing. It makes a trying situation for me." Lady Flora passed a hand across her brow that did not disarrange a single hair. "I know she must have the best, the highest reasons, and yet—I can't swing round with both of you, can I?"

"I am not in touch with her ideas, as you know. I couldn't trace anything in her mind. But of course it will make a difference—how could you think it wouldn't? I'm not at all looking forward to the day it gets into the papers."

"Need it be known?"

Pargeter knitted his brows over his salmon.

"That is what I ask myself. She may stop short of allowing it to be blared abroad."

Lady Flora, in complete disregard of her food, leaned both elbows on the table and clasped her hands.

"I am sure she will."

"You don't know her as well as I do."

"Yes, take it away, Minnie—or is it Clara? So it is. I beg your pardon, Clara. But do take it away."

Clara, with a smile, removed the scarcely tasted plate, and Lady Flora leaned further forward than ever in an impulse that also sent her shoulders out of her gown, and threw her chin up at an angle of anxiety of which the attraction was undeniable.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! It’s simply unimaginable! What’s her—what’s her *position*? What has happened to her?”

“All I can tell you is that it makes a serious difficulty in more ways than one. I accepted the candidature in no reliance upon anybody but myself; but naturally one does not expect one’s first step to be into a hole. And, as you say, like all the world, I thought her social principles were sound.”

Lady Flora clutched her chin.

“It’s maddening for you,” she said. “Of course I see that. Perfectly maddening. And at the eleventh hour like this! But what do you put it down to? Who has done it? *Somebody* has done it. I know my sex; we don’t alter our opinions because of anything we read in the newspapers. Has she been seeing much of that talking man—Norris, do you call him?”

Looking more innocent than ever, Lady Flora ate an olive.

“Norreys has been useful no doubt, but Percy Acourt, I imagine, has done the job for them.”

“Captain Acourt! Oh! That of course simplifies it.”

“Flora, you remind me sometimes of those modern novels with extraordinarily clever titles——”

“And nothing inside to match! I know. I *am* like that,” she told him luminously. “If I knew what a fool I was I believe I should die of

it. Mercifully I think myself quite clever, like the novels."

"Will you explain that cryptic allusion? What 'simplifies' it?"

Lady Flora looked doubtfully at a dish of assorted biscuits, and said, "Why, Clara?"

"Cheese, m'lady."

"If it's cream cheese, yes. If it's only the horrid kinds, no. Thank you, Clara. I believe you keep a little bit hidden away for this mouse. Well," she resumed, "does it really particularly need explanation, my cryptic allusion?"

"Upon my soul I don't know what you mean."

"Am I to understand you haven't realised that it's very, *very* serious?"

Pargeter looked incredulous.

"Do you refer to any sort of attachment?" he demanded bluntly.

"*Mais enfin*"—Lady Flora looked suddenly conscience-stricken. "I don't know how I dare talk about it. Remember I am not in her confidence. But of course one notices."

Pargeter laughed with genuine amusement.

"My dear girl, one imagines! I would as soon suspect a *tendresse* between the Sphinx and the Pope! Of course," he remembered, "there's an intimacy; he is by way of being a connection, and I have chaffed my wife about it."

"You've 'chaffed' her?"

"You are quite right. No born being could chaff her. But I've mentioned it colloquially," he conceded.

"And what happened to you?"

"Oh, I survived. That infernal prig! Oh, no, he's not in love with anybody—least of all with a lady in many respects so like him."

"Ah, I didn't say that!"

Pargeter paused in the peeling of a plum, suddenly interested.

"You mean the affection is wholly hers?"

"Well, if it isn't, she gives it away, and he doesn't. My best of friends, you do not think women can deceive each other in these matters? *Jamais de la vie!* not from a maid, not from a char can we hide it. And though your wife is the greatest woman in England, and I just one of fifty fools who shop in Bond Street, do you think I can't see? Poor darling, she's very, *very* involved, and I'm desperately sorry for her."

Pargeter stared, made some play with his finger-bowl, and carefully wiped his moustache.

"Really you intrigue me enormously. No, I can't say I agree or disagree. Perhaps I haven't been very attentive to the fascinating signs."

"You are a monster."

"Thanks for the key, anyway, to a most interesting situation. I hope it may develop. Now, don't you think we ought to be starting?"

"You're not going to be horrid!"

"Good heavens! Do you see me in the *rôle* of a jealous husband? On the contrary, I congratulate the lady in the case—if it's really as you say."

"On what, if you please?"

Pargeter looked at his watch.

"Oh, on the chance of feeling something, of

getting on those impeccable skirts of hers just the least little smirch of human dust."

"If you think——"

"I don't think—really. May I ring for a taxi?"

"My motor ought to be there. Please don't *dream* there is any dust on her skirts—there isn't. Oh, dear! I wish you would swear to me that I haven't done any harm."

"You haven't done anything at all," said Pargeter as they left the room together.

CHAPTER XI

LADY FLORA may have done very little, but it was enough to increase Pargeter's already good humour. She had given him an extraordinary pleasant thing to think about, and though for the time being he didn't think about it, but deliberately put it in the back of his mind for consideration at greater leisure, his spirits rose perceptibly with the knowledge that it was there. Lady Flora reaped the full reward of her communication in his gaiety and his consideration from the moment the motor took its luxurious way from the door of the Court Club towards the hall of the Society which was presenting "Her Husband's Decree" to its members. She herself was quieter and less responsive than usual, rather shrank into her furs and her corner, and gave him now and then glances in which understanding of his mood mingled with speculation as to what might come of it. It was hard for Lady Flora, sitting there in the full effect of what she had accomplished, to hold herself from going over the ground again, and finding out, so to speak, just what she *had* accomplished. It was so wonderful in the realm of emotion to accomplish anything. She was intrigued and fluttered and not without a tiny spasm of anxiety. She

had spoken as devoid of a bad motive as of any other kind. She dealt in sensation, she could keep a secret only if it was a dull one ; and poor Mrs. Pargeter's was anything but that, even to her husband, as Flora saw, though he treated it so indifferently. She was divided—rather unequally—as she sat there between pleasure in the effect she had produced in him, and regret at its cost. She was not capable of seeing that he had done any harm ; nevertheless, she had a qualm resembling bankruptcy at the image of Mary. In that direction she had spent all her reserves ; there was nothing left that she might have protected. It was only one poor scruple ; and it persisted feebly against the feverish joy of thrusting a hand among the inner mysteries and touching something deep and vital, something that vibrated.

The hall, which was in temporary occupation by the Playwrights' Guild, was already as full as it was going to be when the motor took its turn at the door, having had to wait the moving on of two taxis and a brougham. There was no press of vehicles in the street, and no press of people in the house, but quite enough in both places to show the reality of the occasion. The two taxis signified that the whole of the audience was not arriving by omnibus, and Lady Flora's motor heightened the impression.

Inside there were enough people in evening dress to correspond, and just enough ladies whose attire spoke of the Tube, and just enough

of the shaggy-looking males who were there to turn the thing into business, and of pale non-descripts who were there for any other reason, to make up the usual London audience extraordinary. The over-sophisticated were present, and the weary and the curious, ladies in the boxes who looked so Greek or so Persian as almost to compete with the stage, ambiguous low-necked persons in the stalls with large strong features and cropped hair, convinced spinsters or ladies for whom married life had been a great and painful mistake. Ladies predominated, but the collection as a whole had a wide-gathered look, sparsely reaped from many social spheres. Lady Flora, as she glided to her place in it, had an air of being at once akin and alien; even in so various an aviary she was a bird of another feather. Leland, too, looked distinguished, and of a world of larger interests than the merely intellectual. Glances followed them to their seats; here and there somebody told somebody else who they were. It was a world in which they both enjoyed a distinction and were very much at home.

They came into the liveliest sense of expectation. "Her Husband's Decree" had been proclaimed perfectly impossible. The author, Mr. Chester Cummins, had gladly agreed, in a widely circulated interview, that from the official standpoint it was perfectly impossible, but had publicly thanked God that there were others. Judged by the canons of art, his production was of the most fastidious; he

claimed that it did not contain a redundant phrase. Mr. Chester Cummins was no new aspirant for public favour; he had already produced a sufficient number of plays to assure his admirers that although there might be no redundancy, there would always be just enough. The admirers were a winnowed few; he was not a popular dramatist. The critics who came to his wife's lunches at the Carlton, and the managers who refused to come, knew him better than the public did; but he was, of course, a leading figure in the little band of revolvers who were doing what they could to broaden public taste in the Playwrights' Guild. Lady Flora, who affected the profession, knew Chester Cummins very well. She opened the play-bill feverishly.

"Thank Heaven, she *is* doing it! Poor Mr. Cummins came to me last week tearing his hair, and declaring that nothing would move her short of the remodelling of the whole of the second act. He wanted me to use my influence. As if anybody's influence counted with Aubrey Tavistock in a mood!"

"But I thought the part was written for her," said Pargeter.

"It was—poor Aubrey! And I think it was quite splendid of her to be willing to do it here, when everything fell through at the Imperial. But unreasonable isn't the word for her at the best of times, and in this, of course, she's had absolutely the upper hand."

"She seems as unlucky as he."

“Yes, doesn’t she! Anything worse than the poor darling’s luck—That and her temperament together! I’ve always done my little best for Aubrey, as you know. It was I who introduced her to Calder, who launched her in Lady Delafield. But she makes life one long intercession. Still, there she is—Mrs. Claud Tavistock—and I’m most thankful for poor Chester. It couldn’t be done, absolutely, by anybody else, except possibly Rachel Corfield, and she’s in a nursing home.”

“Do you know the part?” asked Leland.

“I know the piece,” she told him triumphantly. “Chester Cummins read me every word of it last summer, lying on his back in the sitting-room of my cottage in Surrey, and swearing at me between the acts for having no man’s drink in the house but whisky. He did me the honour to try it on me to see if it wasn’t a little *too*, you know, for the public. And it really was. I had to tell him so frankly. At my advice he took two or three things out; but the last time I saw him he told me he’d put them back again! I really, personally, didn’t mind in the least, but I had to advise him for his good, hadn’t I?”

The curtain went up in the midst of their talk on that first act which did so much to put people in the wrong who maintained that Chester Cummins was only a whimsical essayist with an erotic bias, and no playwright at all. It was an entangling, sensational, suggestive act, and it gave Mrs. Claud Tavistock an unusually full

opportunity for developing the ambiguous feminine type into which her own temperament poured so easily. She wandered about her luxurious drawing-room scene pursued by the complication of her circumstances and her egotism, very sumptuous and distraught, very reckless and arrogant and well-dressed; and to judge by its absorption, the soul of the audience followed her. Lady Flora's certainly did. She touched her companion once or twice lightly on the knee to enforce his silence; otherwise she had her being on the stage, where, against the web that was beginning to encompass her, Aubrey Tavistock was making demonstrations at once feline and fatalistic. She drew a long sigh as the curtain fell.

"I had no idea it would act like that," she said. "But Aubrey could make anything act."

Leland had not been so carried away.

"Oh, no," he said, "she couldn't—for the first example that comes to hand—do Lady Teazle. She would make an idiotic Lady Teazle, or Katharine, or anybody not evolved the day before yesterday."

"I see what you mean. She must be herself. But when she *is* herself——"

"She must be the whole play. She is obsessed by her *moi*," said Leland. "I will confess to you, my Flora, that she bores me a little. She is too handsome to bore me much, but just a little. I am not obsessed by her *moi*, you see."

Lady Flora drew her brows together. "I must find out what that means," she said naïvely. "Now, I wonder how much she made Chester do to the second act? A fortnight ago he swore to me he wouldn't concede another hair. The very next day Aubrey went over to Paris."

"And did he go after her?" asked Leland absently.

"On his knees!"

"Listen, Flora," Pargeter said suddenly, in the voice that carries privacy in the midst of any crowd. "Your communication of this evening interests me extraordinarily, as you will imagine."

"No, I didn't imagine." Her eyes were large and frightened.

"Well, you may. And you must tell me more about it—all the little details that have struck your woman's eye—"

"What good will it do you? You can't suppose——"

"None; nothing. But I—— You will understand my being enormously amused, especially in view of what has just happened."

"I don't think I like your being amused."

"You can't help it. Now don't turn priggish, Flora. I assure you it's absolutely too late."

She leaned forward and looked at him; his face was quite pale. Though he spoke of amusement, his mood had evidently changed to something else, something less superficial, perhaps more practical.

“ If it would do you and your horrible situation the least bit of good——” she wavered.

“ How do you know it won’t ? She has at least now—if you are right—a motive for getting rid of me,” he told her, with a bluntness that drowned itself in the orchestra.

“ Leland Pargeter, you astonish and amaze me ! Do you know her, after all these years, so little as that ? ”

“ I have never known her in love.”

Lady Flora took refuge in the rising of the curtain, and sat in a state of abstraction for quite five minutes before the touching scene in the solicitor’s office, where the old family lawyer declares to Lansing Stuart his belief in Mrs. Stuart’s innocence in spite of certain extraordinary appearances. But the moment Mrs. Tavistock reappeared, with a “ mood ” in the ascendant and the bit, as it were, between her teeth, Flora lost herself in that seductive and baffling personality. There was also the second act to scan from memory, and Chester Cummins to discover, shadowed in one of the boxes, Chester Cummins and his venerable mother, whom he so faithfully escorted to all his first nights. It was not until the act closed amid the enthusiastic plaudits of that dear old lady—the rest of the house seemed a little depressed, and two or three of the shaggy males got up and went away—that Lady Flora returned to the problem that, in the mind of her companion, was blighting the entertainment. She demanded whether he didn’t think it very, very powerful.

"It's a kind of hectic pasteboard," he said with some discrimination; and at that she accused him of not having paid the slightest attention.

"You have given me something else to think about," he told her.

"I have been thinking about it too," she assured him; I have been simply possessed with it. It's more fascinating than any play—her situation. It's so lonely and splendid, and cruel."

"I haven't the least objection to her changing all that," said Leland under cover of the music.

"You mean you would help her to," said Lady Flora intelligently, and added, with the flash of shrewdness that always seemed so unlike her when it came. "And your political career?"

Pargeter looked at her as if she had offered him a new consideration.

"There is that," he said. "Certainly. You will hardly believe me when I tell you that I had absolutely forgotten it. There is that—damn it!"

"So you see," said Flora, with relief, "there is nothing in it for you, my poor dear, nothing whatever."

They had long ago reached this extraordinary plainness of speech. It was one of the links that bound Pargeter to Lady Flora, that he could speak to her almost as to an intimate of his own sex, without thinking of the precaution he might be obliged to take towards a male

opinion of what he said. Men had standards and women made prescriptions, but Lady Flora relaxed the discipline of life in every direction, with a running grudge against her sisters for sustaining it so long and so well.

The third act of "Her Husband's Decree," as everybody knows who has read the play in the charming booklet form which it was almost immediately given by Mrs. Cummins and an artistic publisher, contains a situation of quite intolerable originality and force, in which Marion Stuart, believing her husband's happiness to be hopelessly bound up with his love for another woman, declines to clear herself of his suspicions, and leaves him the freedom of an undefended suit. It was a luminous idea, this of Mr. Cummins's, that a wife might love her husband with such a clenching of the hands and teeth that she would sacrifice even her honour to his passion for another lady; and it told deeply upon all who shared with Mr. and Mrs. Cummins and their aged mother, the privilege of seeing it wrought out in the flesh. Upon Lady Flora Bellamy, knowing as she did both Chester Cummins and Aubrey Tavistock so well, it told even passionately. In that one bosom, at least, Mr. Cummins and Mrs. Tavistock jointly triumphed. It was a triumph which Lady Flora celebrated all the way home in the motor, with Leland Pargeter, silent and speculative, by her side. On him Mrs. Tavistock had wrought in vain.

"I detest feminine moral initiative," he told

her. "It is inevitably stupid when it isn't silly." And he found fault with the length of the performance. "It's half-past eleven," he said, looking at his watch as they drew up at Lady Flora's house in Knightsbridge.

"Nevertheless, you will come in and have a sandwich," she insisted. "Emily will have gone to bed, but I told her to leave something ready."

"Just for ten minutes, then." He had not felt for years so desirous of returning to his own roof, so stimulated as to what might be transpiring there. Mary was giving, he remembered, a musical party. He had no desire to stretch out his already long evening with Flora, and every wish to be present at his wife's reception. But he did sit for ten minutes in Lady Flora's charming little white and Wedgwood dining-room, where Emily had left the gayest little fire for them, and poured himself a whisky-and-soda from the siphon that Emily had also left, while Flora, on the other side of the hearth, sipped beef-tea, and cried out upon the barbarous protection offered to public morals by His Majesty's censor of plays. In the case of this one, poor Flora herself was to offer him some small justification, but it is doubtful whether she ever realised that. Certainly she did not realise it then. "Words cannot tell you how splendid I thought her," she cried more than once, but just how far the splendour penetrated as an example it would be hard to say. Pargeter, before the ten minutes were over, had yawned twice; but

Flora was in a state of such happy excitement that she did not sleep even after she had gone to bed, until she had taken a very few drops, in water, of something out of a little bottle that stood always on her dressing-table.

CHAPTER XII

“SHE will not see me,” said Esther Gommie, looking between the blank inside pages of a note with the habit formed by finding cheques there.

“Oh, you wrote!” replied her husband enquiringly, pausing in the task of refilling his fountain pen. Mr. Gommie used a pen very seldom, much less often than the Prime Minister, and when he did it was naturally a fountain one. His typewriter stood on a separate table near his over-laden desk, and Mrs. Gommie’s typewriter stood at a similar distance from her over-laden desk, but the young persons who operated them had not yet arrived. It was the hour of the first post. Mr. and Mrs. Gommie, having finished their frugal breakfast, were scouting, as it were, over the labours of the day on opposite sides of the room in which they passed most of their time. It was a scantily furnished room, but there were enough chairs in it for a committee. Three large windows let in light and air without greater impediment than holland blinds. The floor was covered with linoleum that still smelt of soap and water. Over the mantelpiece hung a photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Gommie, surrounded by members of the Outlook Society on their wedding day. It had a solemn, consecrated look.

The other decorations were principally reproductions of Greek temples, friezes, and statues, but the wedding photograph seemed to dwarf the significance of these and relegate them to their proper places in antiquity. It had particularly this effect on the Parthenon, which hung nearest. The room seemed closely related to Mrs. Gommie. Its austerity sat upon her brow. Mr. Gommie had about as much to do with it as the coal-scuttle, which was practical in every way. There were plenty of books, most of which had the look of being issued at the expense of the State; and there were several shaded maps that suggested the returns of mortality and crime. The room had no other furniture, except the overladen desks and Mr. and Mrs. Gommie, who had not changed in any way, apparently, since the day of their marriage on the wall.

"Yes, I wrote," answered Mrs. Gommie. "Perhaps it was a mistake, but I have not really time, Clarence, to consult you about all I do."

"Of course you haven't—of course not, Queenie. And, besides, it was no doubt absolutely the right thing."

Esther was a queen, and so, at this later epoch, was Mrs. Gommie. Her husband had long been aware of it, and given it this graceful recognition.

"But Mary won't make an appointment," he went on, with a certain absence of tact.

His wife assumed a look of patience, and slightly compressing her lips, handed Mr. Gommie the letter, which he read aloud.

“DEAR MRS. GOMMIE,

“Replying to your letter of to-day’s date, I do not feel that the interview you suggest upon the subject of my husband’s candidature for High Pollard would contribute either to your satisfaction or to mine. The matter is one which I feel particularly averse to discussing. I am sure you will understand my disinclination under the circumstances. With my kind regards, Yours very truly,

“MARY PARGETER.”

“She ought to have said ‘in the circumstances,’ ” said Miss Gommie acidly. “For so able a woman she has very little sense of the smaller proprieties of composition.”

Mr. Gommie, who always wrote “under the circumstances” himself, and had often defended it, observed another sign that his wife, as that excellent fellow expressed it, had been “over-doing.”

“It proves, at all events, that she wrote it herself,” he said soothingly.

“Oh, yes, she wrote it herself. My letter would have reached her by the last post yesterday; she must have replied within an hour. There was no time to consult anybody. But I don’t see what good that does us.”

“Well, it shows that her attitude isn’t altogether dictated,” said Clarence, meditating.

“I had prepared the most magnificent assault, both upon her heart and head,” his wife told him; “now I shall have to deliver it by letter.”

Clarence Gommie got up from his desk, thrust

his hands into his trouser pockets which he distended, and took to pacing the room.

"No, dearest," he said firmly. "No. You must not deliver it by letter. We should only get, in reply, certain net statements that might be the greatest inconvenience to us. Much better leave the situation plastic."

"And assume——"

"And assume—what we choose. Assumption is natural, isn't it?"

Mrs. Gommie turned to a patent letter file. "Let us see what they say exactly," she said, and drew out the last communication of the Secretary to the Worsham Branch of the State Labour Association. She read aloud:

"'Could you not obtain Mrs. Pargeter's appearance at least at an occasional meeting? Her continued absence is affecting us adversely. Pargeter, moreover, while he speaks effectively, is easily embarrassed by heckling, and we think he would be likely to get less of it if she were on the platform. However that may be, we are losing an impressive advantage so long as she is off the scene of affairs.' What will they say, Clarence—*what will they say*—when they know the truth?"

Mrs. Gommie threw out her hands with a tragic gesture, and her husband paused in his walk to lay a gentle finger upon her shoulder.

"Have you taken your neurotogen this morning? I thought not. Now, Queenie."

"Clarence, with a cause trembling in the balance as it never trembled in the balance before,

how can you speak to me of neurotogen ? *What is to be done with Mary Pargeter ?* Answer me that, if you have a heart in your bosom. Could we get her out of England ? ”

“ I would as soon try to move the Bank,” Clarence told her with a final pat. “ I’ll have to go down there, I suppose, and do a little explaining on the quiet, and we must work a few paragraphs. I was bound to take him on my back sooner or later. I knew that.”

“ Oh, Clarence, and you have so much on your back already ! All the poverty, all the hunger, all the misery and crime of three kingdoms ! ” Her voice took a note of music. “ Could he not be persuaded to withdraw ? ”

Gommie hesitated, on the brink of a confession. He had not always time, either, to consult his wife about what he did, but when he omitted to do so, he seldom mentioned it afterwards. This time the omens were propitious, and he took the plunge.

“ My beloved, I sounded him a week ago. I went to him, and said, ‘ Now, my dear fellow, let us have a heart to heart talk about this.’ And we had one—at least I had. I didn’t feel the warmth of his heart exactly. I think he belongs to the amphibia. However, he couldn’t freeze me out of my determination to lay the case very plainly before him. I even went so far as to hint at his adoption under—well, under something like false pretences. Absolutely useless. He wouldn’t understand. Deplored his wife’s change of views and all that, but showed me

pretty plainly that he'd rather win on his own if he could. That's fatal, you know ; means he won't do a blooming thing to propitiate her. He ought to go on his knees."

Mrs. Gommie smiled. She liked the implication of the proper posture for the other sex, from Clarence, her husband, who took it so often himself. She allowed the rather serious admission that he had approached Pargeter without consulting her, and had failed with him, to pass.

"But you do not despair, Clarence?"

"Oh, not at all. It's a setback, of course, but Pargeter has made quite a good impression. Seems a bit stingy about expenditure, which is queer. I suppose she lets him go to the till, doesn't she, or has she locked it up? We will be obliged to concentrate a bit more on the constituency than I expected, but he may very well win the election."

"You may win it for him, you mean, Clarence."

Her husband faced round upon her, a square little figure, with its trouser pockets more distended than ever.

"Well, the work you and I did last year in the constituency is bound to have its effect. We've practically made ourselves responsible for the place—Scance told me so himself—and we can't let it go. And there's still a very fair hope that amongst us we may get him pitchforked into the House. After all, it's a seat on his own door-step. But to keep him there will be quite a different proposition. And I object to wasting

so much powder and shot on him for that reason. We're losing the chance of a stayer."

"He is very convinced of the truth of our ideals," argued Mrs. Gommie. "I must say he impressed *me*."

"No doubt he thinks he is. But he will drop out next time, whatever happens in January."

"Why?"

"Oh, that sort always do. The people find them out," replied her husband robustly, and at that moment the arrival of their young lady typewriters, Miss Daw and Miss Porter, recalled the pair to the many other problems and undertakings that went hand in hand with the return of Leland Pargeter as Labour-Socialist candidate for High Pollard. Having bidden Miss Daw and Miss Porter a bright "Good morning," Mr. and Mrs. Gommie sat down to their overladen desks.

CHAPTER XIII

SO far as the records show, political genius in England had never before taken the form it assumed in Walter Norreys. Hastily to construct him one thought of several personalities of the past, but the blend, whether you mixed it with Byron or with Burke, would always leave him fundamentally and bafflingly Norreys, a light playing over modern politics which it was futile to call Celtic and imagine you had done with it. It was a light that threw far across the European scene ; it illuminated the minds of statesmen to the public gaze ; it even showed the democracy something of its own heart. It was therefore from the point of view of the British temperament an uncanny light ; and there were those who saw in its ascendance in the councils of one of the great parties a portent and sign of the times, feeling that the days were safer when Norreys would have been a prophet in the wilderness. Norreys went anywhere at any hour, and the men-servants of the leader of the Opposition had more than once seen their master accompany him to the actual hall door, pausing to talk with animation upon every other step of their joint passage down the stairs. Once, indeed, on an unexpectedly chilly

night in June, Mr. Calthorpe had affectionately buttoned Norreys into one of his own overcoats, while they waited for the taxi from the stand ; an accommodation which no doubt was only fair, considering how often that politician was said to make public appearances in overcoats provided by Norreys. Whether you agreed with him or not, the man carried about with him an atmosphere of such intellectual delight that you clung to him and stood upon his shadow to the last—it came to that. So he had the key to many worlds, and when he spoke he carried the conviction, to some people, that if what he said was not true already, it very shortly would be.

Norreys' contemplations were of the first order of importance. He was absorbed in the big things ; the little ones remained, so to speak, in the corner of his eye, where they sometimes inconvenienced, but did not interest him. Society, he knew, was decorated with figures like Lady Flora Bellamy. He sometimes found one at his elbow at dinner, when he looked it in the plate with a convulsive statement about nothing, to which its response was indifferent ; and there was no more. Norreys could not reveal himself or anything else to such persons ; he preferred to take off his hat to them with gravity and get out of their way. Still, he had a link with them, a link which made them entertaining, in Gertrude Ambrose, the novelist. Mrs. Ambrose was of those who travel through life on the

trains of great ladies, observing them with the utmost cleverness as they bore her along. Her diagnosis of their minds was as skilful as a fashionable doctor's of their bodies, and they liked being diagnosed, and rewarded Mrs. Ambrose with things that she liked—invitations, intimacy. Mrs. Ambrose was very clever, so clever that one was not always certain that she understood herself; and smart society, which is also clever, naturally appreciated the consecration of so brilliant an intellect to its service. Cynical young persons, reviewing her in the slummier parts of Chelsea, called her novelist-in-ordinary to Park Lane; she was certainly the intellectual jewel of more than one coronet. There was only one thing in Mrs. Ambrose, who was a Roman Catholic, that was stronger than her intelligence, and that was her passion, not for the British aristocracy, which she found, as a body, impressive, but churchy and heterogeneous, but for the radiant "smart" effervescence of it, which has so often to submit to descriptions less happy than hers. That tickled her nose in the wine-glass and intoxicated her. She mixed it with the heirs of the smaller European principalities and really drank too much of it.

Mrs. Ambrose had known Lady Flora Bellamy a long time. Poor Lady Flora, who was now only one of a crowd whose pretensions Mrs. Ambrose considered with the calmest appraisal, had been one of the first to hail her subtle and elusive genius, and to make it the feature

of lunches and tea parties. Lady Flora's gate was a wide one, and to Mrs. Ambrose, snug in the citadel, it now represented one of the outer portals; but there had been a time when her monogram stood for something, and to do Gertrude Ambrose justice, she never forgot. Lady Flora could still engage her by telephone for an impromptu dinner at the Ritz or the Carlton, though it was now necessary to say what the company would be—could still summon her to charm away one of those hours of depression that seemed to come so much more often than was accountable in the ordinary way. Thanks to the best masseuse, hair specialist, and corsetière in London, there was very little to complain of in Lady Flora's appearance yet; nevertheless, the days would come when she felt uncommonly down, and when Gertrude Ambrose, who was so understanding, and practically never appeared without sheaves of flowers, was better than electric treatment or anything else.

Gertrude, however, though Lady Flora's world was her triumph and its conduct her constant occupation, did not confine herself to it. In her way she was a politician, though the simple and definite lines of modern British parties gave less scope than she could have enjoyed, and she knew Walter Norreys. She met him at many houses, recognised him as a power, flattered and quoted him continually. More than once, indeed, she had seized upon one of Norreys' "things" as it issued from pirate lips, and restored it to the owner. Gertrude was very honest,

It must have been of her news that Norreys was thinking when he spoke to Percy Acourt as the two walked together, townward, along the Green Park palings of Piccadilly. The men were political comrades and confidants, a relation which allows, almost entails, an intimacy of thought and a license of discussion denied to some closer forms of friendship.

"I hear," said Norreys, "there is at last some chance of a divorce."

To begin with, there was never the least chance of a divorce of any interest that Mrs. Ambrose had not heard of at least a fortnight before it became common gossip. And Norreys had taken her in to dinner the previous night.

"I should think that rather impossible," said Captain Acourt quietly, though if Norreys had turned his eyes that way the arrested look upon his companion's face would not have escaped him. They had been talking, as the initiated generally were by this time talking, of the curious position in which the Labour Candidate for High Pollard found himself with regard to his wife. The data had been almost altogether contributed by Norreys, who made it the basis of a brilliant excursion into the realm of feminine political influence of the future, and never noticed, as he talked, that he was being listened to with any deeper attention than was his due or his wont.

"I should think it altogether impossible," repeated Acourt.

"Should you? Now should you? Well, I'm

sorry—I'm sorry. It is of all things, of all things in the world, the thing which, to my mind, would be most excellent and fitting. I am no friend to divorce, that white ant—that white ant that would eat the very heart out of our social structure—but the case of these uneven Pargeters is a spectacle that makes our civilisation ridiculous. But, of course, I forget; you are related. I should assuredly have been more careful."

Norreys broke off, laying a deprecating hand upon Acourt's arm, struck with the recollection that he had once or twice of late heard Mrs. Pargeter call him Percy.

"No doubt, if it is mere idle rumour, you can set it at rest," Norreys continued.

"On the contrary, I imagine I have less information than anybody," said Acourt hastily. "We are connected by marriage only, not related; and—and Mrs. Pargeter is the last woman in the world, I should say, to disclose any intention of a private nature before it was absolutely necessary. But I have never heard this said before. Do you yourself take the report seriously?"

The question forced itself out.

"I can say as much as this—my informant is seldom wrong upon such matters. Pray don't misunderstand me. I admire the lady, I respect her, I even like her; but she circles over a coming scandal like a certain bird over a dying creature. She knows just when it will be ready for what I would not for the world call her

talons, but that my simile drives me to it. She is uncanny in these matters—uncanny.”

“I can’t help knowing who you mean. And her prediction in this instance is——”

“That it will come. You know, of course, that Pargeter has committed the extraordinary error—from the point of view of his own interest—of leaving Arlington Street altogether?”

“Yes, I knew that. He has taken a house in Worsham, for obvious reasons. But there is nothing to prevent his coming back.”

“Nothing but this glorious draught of independence in antagonism—this heady wine of self-expression. The man makes a pathetic spectacle, Acourt. He’s not much of a fellow, but upon my soul I hope he won’t come back. The fate of perpetual eclipse in the shade of a Brobdignagian woman——”

Acourt frowned faintly. Norreys’ imagination had really at times too strong a pinion.

“And suppose he does not?”

“The theory as it was laid before me is that much depends upon the result in High Pollard. If by any miracle he should be returned, it is not supposed that she would choose that moment——”

“Quite so. It would be extremely unlike her.”

“On the other hand, if the Worsham railway shops turn him down there wouldn’t be the same reason for forbearance.”

“I see,” said Acourt.

“Unluckily for him I understand that the

caitiff has for many years made it all too plain that release would be grateful to him," continued Norreys ; " and that has hitherto gone against him with the lady. She has retired to a kind of moral Lake Manasarwar, where even prayer arrives in a frozen state——"

" Ah," said Acourt mechanically.

" But all that is supposed to be changed, as by a stroke of the sun. There is a great melting and flotation, with which the City is as yet unacquainted," gurgled Norreys, whose felicities welled from him like water from a full bottle, impeded by the quantity behind. " I understand—though it may be pure invention—that there is at last somebody else."

Captain Acourt's neatly furled umbrella, which he was using as a walking stick, flew out of his hand and fell across the pavement. As he stooped over it Norreys added :

" You will now demand who is the gentleman so distinguished, and there—and there I fail you. I fared royally, but that exquisite morsel was withheld from me. But no doubt the world will have an index finger ready."

The men strode on for a moment in a dislocation made by the crowd about a stopping omnibus, and Norreys began to feel the *gêne* that Percy Acourt above all men was able to impart by his mute displeasure.

" Forgive me, Acourt, forgive me," he said, " if I have spoken thoughtlessly. I should have remembered that the lady is your kinswoman. Apart from that, indeed, her own greatness

—and her sex—should protect her from our rattling tongues. I'm sorry, Acourt—I'm sorry."

"Good God, Norreys, so far as I am concerned it's not a personal matter!" exclaimed Acourt. "I've already explained that Mrs. Pargeter is not my 'kinswoman,' as you put it, but I could not more sincerely deplore her unhappy position if she were. Knowing her as well as I do I should think it unlikely, however, most unlikely, that there is anything in the story that appears to to be in circulation; and I hope I do not presume upon our friendship in asking you to give it no further currency."

Norreys listened with concern. There was an unexpected, unreasonable violence in Acourt's voice which betrayed itself through the restraint of what he said. The "no further currency" demand was almost an attack upon Norreys, though no one knew better than Acourt that it was not deserved, and that Norreys had spoken under privilege, and absolutely without malice. He, Norreys, was the most sensitive of men to the moods of others, and he became aware of a particular as well as a general discomfort in the companionship of the man beside him, a point of fixed anger, directed against himself. He continued to feel it until Acourt with a muttered excuse left him to go into a bookseller's shop. They had walked some distance past the turn to Arlington Street, where he had expected to part with Acourt, who announced himself when they met as on the way to see Mrs. Pargeter upon certain proposals of the Agricultural Development

Trust scheme, in which her co-operation was so important. Remembering this, Norreys decided that Acourt wished to reflect upon these proposals in the light of the information he had just received, which is not improbable.

CHAPTER XIV

A COURT, in the bookshop, waited upon by a young lady with very imposing yellow hair, purchased two or three of the small articles most conspicuous on the counter—a diary, a “Where Is It,” a copy of the *Saturday Review*. The young lady eyed him with curiosity deepening into suspicion, he was so obviously detached from the business that brought him in; and in her position, with her hair, she had to be careful. Her severity increased when he walked, without his change, over to the standard editions on the shelves, and stood there inspecting them with an eye, as anybody could see, that did not take in so much as the colour of their bindings. She drew a breath of relief and regret when he dropped, through the door, into the tide of Piccadilly. He was more than unusually distinguished-looking, and she had a feeling that she would never see him again.

Captain Acourt, due at Mrs. Pargeter's house, and feeling the need of solitude and reflection first, naturally kept to the London streets. He turned westward again, and strode with an air that betrayed no special preoccupation towards the Park. As he walked, mindful of his carriage, of his public impassivity, of the possible bows of acquaintances, definite ideas refused to

come to him; he saw nothing net. He walked a long way before the wide green spaces of the Park, empty under a doubtful and rather dreary December afternoon, offered him at last a privacy. He crossed the road and turned in at the first open gate, struck north into the no-man's-land verging towards Bayswater, and then began to think as he walked, slowly and with precision.

It was the first hour in which certain circumstances which had surrounded this young man for some time, nebulous and ungraspable, had taken something like a line. He had been well enough aware of them in that vague form, but the cloud brought no pressure and little inconvenience; it simply floated along with him, and he had been obliged to reckon with it as a cloud only. The worst that could be said of it was that it blotted out the view in one direction.

Percy Acourt was not pleasing to women. They looked at him twice, but the second look invariably condemned him. They disliked the coldness of his manner, criticised the absorption that made him contemptuous of the little things of life; resented his indifference to themselves among its amenities. He had nothing for women, no reward of word or glance. If their curiosity led them near him they were apt to retreat as from the borders of some desert or polar region, which they felt ill-equipped to explore. Early in his career, and actuated by a simple sense of its necessities, he had proposed to an American heiress, pretty and authenticated, after three days in a country house. She refused

him with a terror and indignation which offended him so deeply that he definitely abandoned that form of negotiation, even to the point of declining, where it was possible, the acquaintance of trans-Atlantic ladies. Here and there a very old woman would tolerate him, or a very young one would find herself hypnotised by his chilly difference from the average of her experience; but he stood, with folded arms, outside the scope of feminine drama in general. The two women of whose interest in him we know were distinctly women in particular.

Acourt, for all his special equipment, had the vanity of any other man, and there were these reasons why Mary Pargeter's passion must have consoled it. He had also the secretiveness of perhaps any other ten; and we may imagine him keeping his discovery of her heart in the very dark of his mind, to visit at intervals of leisure, but barely to recognise, in the apprehension of what might be involved. It was to him a discovery with a shock in it. His was an intensely ordered mind; moral symmetry was its ideal, and regularity of conduct its very corner stone. Not for an instant did he see himself the proclaimed or even the suspected hero of unauthorised emotion. The *rôle* would have been intolerable to him. He could entertain it only behind double-locked doors, when it is not impossible to suppose that he aided its consideration by some pulling of his moustache.

This did not prevent his putting the discovery to such proof as was discreet, or realising it as a

considerable matter, which stirred, there in the dark, with issues. By its issues, indeed, he mainly proved it. Mary was worse provided with strategy than most women; but her simplicity placed her beyond the need for it. She accepted the thing that had come to her as unnameable, and never named it; but she was equally far from stooping to any pretence that it was not there. What was permitted to her, that she did. She gave Acourt her confidence, made him emperor of her political ideas, with increasing control and direction of an exchequer which she more and more frankly administered in the public interest. Such other betrayals as his curious eye perceived were in spite of herself; this she made with her whole heart, and there was a good deal in it for an ambitious young man to ponder.

So that, for months, had been his position toward Mary Pargeter, a position for which we must avoid all brutal summing up, as he did. His behaviour was faultless, or would have been if he could have sworn that he was unaware of his tremendous advantage. She had every tacit reason for understanding that he held her in quite as high esteem as before she committed her great indiscretion; and this in Acourt was not to be taken for granted, since in his eyes indiscretions of this sort were not venial. He put his brains at her disposal, as honestly as is possible to a politician, and gave her, in her public undertakings, the most conscientious lead he could, compatible with the interest of his party.

But for Pamela it would have been simple enough. If Pamela had been anybody else even, it would have been simpler. But Pamela certainly did bar and threaten much that he wanted to do in Arlington Street and elsewhere, while Mary in Arlington Street, with all that she so gracefully, so romantically, and yet so practically stood for, underlined as plainly the impossibility that he should ever ask her stepdaughter to be his wife.

The underlining was irritating, since the impossibility was plain enough without it. Pamela had nothing, and it was clearly understood that she never would have anything. There had been other arrangements; but at her own and her father's express desire they had been cancelled when she left her stepmother's house. She and Leland had made a point of it; and it was undeniable, as they insisted, that though she would never have anything she would always have quite enough. Mary gravely accepted the new condition as she accepted everything else. No doubt, it looked larger to Leland and Pamela than it did to her. The daughter of Benjamin Lossel was not likely to have such rooted convictions of the value of money benefits as to force them upon anyone. Since Pamela did not want her, her protection, her roof, it seemed negligible that she did not want her money. And, of course, Mary saw the business aspect of it, and the conscientious aspect. She relieved Pamela of her obligation, and allowed her to feel justified, to that extent,

in the joys of her separate existence. One is doubly justified if one can ever so discreetly tell of it, and it seemed imperative to Pamela very soon that Percy Acourt should know. So he learned, lightly but unmistakably, that Pamela had foregone all benefits from the house of Lossel. His disapproval was as profound as his inability to express it, and it is doubtful whether the contrast offered by his own attitude towards that great banking concern did very much to reconcile him.

All this was his problem as it had been yesterday, ruffled a little by Pamela's desertion to her father, but otherwise his problem as it had surrounded him for more than a year. It had surrounded without impeding him. Now, if there was anything in this story Norreys had got hold of, might it not be about to become net and confront him? Somebody else! It was like a brand.

By this time he had crossed the Park road and penetrated the north end of Kensington Gardens. There he took an inconspicuous penny chair and sat down. His solitude was shared by three children and a dog, who seemed to secure it.

The thing he had first to overcome was his own acute irritation. He had taken the most elaborate precautions, had surrounded his public relations with Mary with every circumstance of formality and reserve, indeed, his private relations as well; and yet the dogs had found the bone. There was "somebody else," at last somebody else. There was no assurance in

Norreys' not knowing who. Norreys was the one man who wouldn't know who. Granted that people who knew Mary Pargeter could accept the idea of an irregular attachment in connection with her, it was not likely that there could be any doubt as to its object. Acourt realised fully, for the first time, how completely he had depended on her character and personality, her mere stature among women, to protect her from such imputations, which would indeed have had an absurdity before the wretched complication he himself had brought into her life. He was distressed for Mary, and angry with the dogs for her sake. He looked carefully back over his own conduct to see whether he ought not to be equally angry with himself, but was obliged to find it correct everywhere and in every particular. He had been slow even to believe——.

But, of course, looking at it calmly, circumstances did give a lead to the dogs. You cannot move a mountain in politics without attracting some attention; and when it is a mountain of gold, almost too much credit is given to the achievement. Then Pargeter's taking the same moment for his most unlucky assertion of himself with its deplorable consequences was alone enough to set all the tongues wagging. Acourt now thought that if Mrs. Pargeter had consulted him he would have advised her to see her husband through his campaign under any imaginable flag rather than lend such a possible point to scandal. But she had not consulted him. She

had ridden too straight, too unconsideringly, to the logical conclusion of her course. In this he found her a little to blame. He forgot the moment in which he himself had called her husband's candidature an "appalling complication," and his satisfaction at hearing her deny that it was anything of the sort. If she had only laid the matter before him ! "But women always rush their fences," he reflected, almost aloud. Certainly Mary had been over-impetuous. And now for the first time in that dreary domestic partnership held together by the house of Lossel, Pargeter had formally left the roof of that house, taking with him, as Acourt was aware, all his possessions, no doubt in pure—and very comprehensible—resentment. He was not a man to think twice in a matter of that kind. Heaven only knew what other provocations there were for the step his long-suffering wife was said at last to contemplate ; but it was generally understood that the gravest had never been lacking. No, there was no aspect of such an intention which could show Mary at all to blame. Only—to have held a position of such magnificent superiority for so long, and finally to abandon it, seemed a pity. Yet, he comforted himself, she would stand fast. As for the "somebody else," hinted so broadly by Norreys, that dwindled, as he went on thinking, to the inevitable suspicion of the vulgar, to be let alone at that. Mary's action would be independent of anybody else, of himself or another ; he declined to imagine her moved by such a consideration. The sordid

world measured her by its own standards, but if he knew Mary Pargeter the fact of somebody else would influence her the other way. Still, the point he forced himself to meet was that circumstances might at last have driven this lady to seek her freedom; it was really quite likely. And in that event, what did he see himself capable of desiring—of doing?

He remembered, with relief, Norreys having said that Mary's action would be contingent on Pargeter's failure to enter public life. She would not "turn him down" at such a critical period of his career as his return to Parliament; it would look invidious. Nay, argued Percy Acourt, it would be invidious. On the other hand, to add such a blow to his defeat—would that not also be invidious? Very far, at least, from magnanimous? Acourt could not believe that Mary would fail to see it in that light. On a review of the chances as a whole, however, Acourt found himself in a non-party mood toward the campaign in High Pollard. He sincerely hoped that the electors would return Leland Pargeter. That was the sole conclusion to which his unhappy balancings had brought him at the end of an hour.

Then, as the three children and the dog had begun to make his chair a kind of distant pivot for their enterprises, he got up and walked out into Bayswater, where he found a cab, and returned to his chambers in Pall Mall. Thence he telephoned the information to Arlington Street, where it was respectfully received and

conveyed to Mary by the second footman, that he had been unexpectedly detained. Acourt drew out of his embarrassment one conviction, that it would be unwise for him to present himself at Arlington Street that afternoon. He would have been even more certain that he ought not to go there if he could have seen as well as heard the reception of his excuses by the second footman, who, as he repeated them aloud, accosted his fellow lackey with a wink. It was quite a horrific wink in its suggestion of intimate acquaintance with facts.

Nor was this by any means the first perturbed, disarranged, and wasted afternoon that could be put to the account of Lady Flora Bellamy and her distinguished friend Gertrude Ambrose.

CHAPTER XV

PARGETER had taken the house in Worsham with the somewhat doubtful assent of his agent, who agreed as to its convenience, but never ceased to deplore those electric and other repairs that prevented at least partial residence at Hareham Park. Hareham was the show place of the county, not for its historic or architectural value, but for its poetic extravagance and the curious Byzantine features introduced by the first Lord Lossel, who built it. The design expressed a marriage of Eastern romance and British opulence; it was there, indeed, that the first Lord Lossel, white-haired, in a velvet coat, wrote that drama in verse which he had always proposed to himself as the occupation of his retirement. The library could still produce several copies of it from the shelves nearest to the gold stars of the dome. It was like a Lossel to be able to provide an empyrean for his own achievement.

The house had been notable for three generations on these grounds, and of late years the estate naturally gathered into itself every feature of enlightened management. The place was in the van of agricultural progress; there was nothing they did not know and did not practise

at Hareham. The tenants were the luckiest in England. The estate was very large, and had always been enough for the Lossels; they had concentrated on it, made it represent them, and had no landed interest except in its neighbourhood. Mary had been born there, and had never known the time when it was not her home and her pleasure. There was something in her that matched Hareham; as its chatelaine she was in the picture, and there were parts of the grounds, especially the grove with the dancing mænads, that made her feel imaginative. Not to the point of affecting her administration, which was as practical here as in her board room in the City; though at Hareham she allowed herself one or two luxuries. She turned the "Home" farmhouse, with its orchard, garden, meadows, and spinney, into a permanent annex to the children's hospitals of London, and the village on the north-east boundary of the park, where it crumbled into cottages on the Worsham road, had long been nicknamed Old Man's Ease from the number of her pensioners who smoked their declining pipes in chimney corners of the latest sanitary design there. Hareham was also, of course, if not the source, an important confluent to every river of beneficence that flowed in its neighbourhood. The Tyrrell subscriptions had never thought of competing.

Assuredly the husband of such a place, wooing the constituency of which it was the pride, should be the first to see the "pull" it gave him to be more than ever identified with it.

But no, Hareham, as Mr Drake put it, was apparently to be wiped off the slate. Repairs and renovations which might much more reasonably have been done in the spring were being pushed on at once, apparently to make the house uninhabitable; and what was even less comprehensible, the contracts for them had been placed with London firms, as if there were no plumbers in Worsham out of a job. Mr. Drake had told his candidate he was going to find that very hard to explain. He had supposed they would have to find some old lie; and the candidate had willingly assented to any old lie, but had taken no steps, and seemed likely to take no steps, to alter the fact that since High Pollard had accepted him neither he nor Mrs. Pargeter had slept a night at Hareham Park.

Mr. Drake laid this aspect of the matters in his charge very explicitly before Mr. Clarence Gommie, in Pargeter's committee-room at Worsham, the day Mr. Gommie ran down there to see how things were shaping. The room was just over the quarters occupied by the fire-engine equipment, of which Worsham was so justly proud, and very convenient, the tramline to the railway shops passing the door, also very conspicuous, being at a corner. Its location there was a coup of Drake's, who happened to know that the building was private-owned. The fire hall seemed to extend to it a kind of protection. It looked, indeed, as if the fire hall were itself responsible for the magnificent outbreak of Pargeter's name and portrait, which

made the upper storey conspicuous for a mile in three directions.

It was nine in the morning. Gommie had come down by a night train from the North, and the little man had the solid but slightly frayed look of long travel by parcel post. He was to meet Pargeter at ten, but had his own reasons for seeing the agent and the local chairman first, and had foregone certain amenities of the early morning in order to do it. He was on the simplest terms with the agent.

"Of course it's handy for me, having him on the spot when I want him," Drake was saying; "but I'd rather the deputations went to Hareham, and so would Bennett."

Mr. Gommie shut up his small knife and restored it with a brisk movement to his waistcoat pocket. His nails were at last passable.

"Oh well, we must allow a candidate some margin. I'm not sure that he isn't well advised. Hareham's a bit luxurious for our purposes. Anyhow, the line to take is that our man, standing as he does for the wider distribution, *etcetera*, wishes to disassociate himself, you understand, *etcetera*. If he had his way Hareham would be a people's park. Rub that in. Why, man, Pargeter has conscientious scruples against living at Hareham—can't stand the contrast with the lot of the poor at his gates. You don't catch that bloated chap Tyrrell doing anything of the sort. It ought to be nuts to you. What sort of a place has he taken here?"

"Oh, a good enough house—solid, substantial,

stands off the road a bit behind some evergreens; belongs to a doctor here, just retired, and gone abroad for a year. Nothing the matter with the house."

"Then that's all right," said Gommie cheerfully. "Does the daughter stay there, too?"

"She comes over a good deal from High Pollard, but she's living in rooms there; it's the head-quarters of the Women's Committee. She's doing very well over there, but I don't encourage her much in Worsham, or any of 'em. The men won't stand it; they're an independent lot. They stuck notices up at the yards last time: 'Petticoats Not Admitted.'"

"By Jove! wish they were illegal," said Clarence. "But since they're not, it doesn't do to despise them, Drake."

"Rather not. But we've got plenty of very useful lady workers right here," said Drake, a little restively. "Miss Pargeter isn't the sort to go down with the shops. They're a prosperous lot, you see——"

"Oh, no doubt, no doubt! Only in Mrs. Pargeter's enforced absence—she's really not at all well—heart, you know—has sometimes been confined to the house for days together—it might be as well to bring the daughter forward as much as possible."

"Well," grudged the agent, "she's always on the platform with him. Weather won't keep her at home. But don't ask us to set her up instead of her mother. Bread and a stone ain't in it for comparison."

Clarence had been sitting still as long as he could endure to do so. He got up and began to pace the large untidy room, distending his trouser pockets.

"I don't mind telling you," continued the agent, "that I took on this job under the impression that Pargeter would get the fullest backing from Mrs. P. I've had my political training in this constituency, and I knew well enough she was worth two hundred Tory votes here in Worsham alone as things are now. And I think you will find that idea was pretty well fixed in the minds of the Executive Committee. Bennett has said before this that there wasn't a man in England he would have taken from the Whip except Pargeter, and for those reasons. Here is Bennett."

Bennett came in—broad, red, genial, with a bristling black moustache and an eye to match, a confident tread, and a heavy overcoat. The agent, nervous and sallow, shrank visibly by the physical standard of Bennett, lost his assertiveness and came to heel. Even Gommie, by comparison, looked insignificant and London-worn. The men shook hands heartily, but before he sat down Bennett cast a measuring eye over the lists on the wall.

"We will have to double that account in the next three weeks," he said, "or we may as well put our shutters up, eh, Drake?"

Drake responded with a rather sickly smile.

"Easier said than done," said Clarence Gommie for him pleasantly.

“ A damn sight easier,” said Bennett, and hitched his chair nearer to the table ; “ but we’ve got to do it.”

He and the agent looked at Gommie, awaiting the inevitable question, and after perhaps three seconds’ hesitation Gommie put it.

“ Well, gentlemen, you’ve had the candidate in training some time now. What’s the pace ? ”

“ In this town,” said Bennett, with emphasis, “ the candidate’s pace is about that of the hearse at his own funeral. We are, I think, making some progress in High Pollard and Trimmer. He’s caught on with the small factories about there—God knows why—and he’ll pick up a certain number of the farmers and small shop-keepers who haven’t yet got it out of their heads that he represents his wife. Of course he’ll get the party vote ; we’ve ways of seeing to that. But, as to pulling down the Tyrrell majority for himself——”

“ I’m surprised that Tyrrell decided to stand,” said Gommie. “ He can’t expect to win, in a Nonconformist place like this, in face of the evidence——”

“ We can’t make too much of that,” said Bennett gloomily. “ In fact, we were warned off it gently early in the day. They let us have it fairly plain that if we rubbed certain matters in too hard it would be up to us to whitewash our man. We’d rather let that alone. They’ve got nothing definite, but we’d rather let it alone.”

Gommie, momentarily arrested by the arrival

of Bennett, resumed his march up and down the room. He kicked a fat cigar-end before him as he went. The other two watched him, Bennett moving his big head to do so with obvious discomfort.

"Does he work?" asked Clarence.

"Not what I call working. He speaks—we've been averaging three meetings in twenty-four hours for some time now—and seems to think it stops there. He's the worst canvasser we've got, and he's no hand with deputations. I've got to use the oil-can after him every time. And where's the wife, Mr. Gommie? Mrs. Pargeter isn't treating the party as the party expected her to treat it—and had a right to expect her to treat it. We undertook to run them as a pair—did we, or didn't we?"

Mr. Gommie faced round on him.

"Oh, hang it all, man; you know as well as I do——"

"Yes, I know; they're supposed to have their private differences. But that sort of thing don't count in a campaign, not if a woman's worth her salt. She puts it by till the fight's over."

Clarence Gommie groaned within him.

"Well, the fact is," he said, "there does seem to be more of a—well, more of what you might call a rift in that quarter than we had any reason to expect. We may as well make up our minds to it. My wife and I know her very well, and we've been doing our best to make her what you might call see reason; but she's a woman who's

accustomed to having her own way, and the long and the short of it is, Bennett, that we *won't* get her down here to mix herself up personally in Pargeter's canvass. I don't say there isn't some little revenge in it," improvised Clarence. "He has certainly treated her anything but fairly for a good many years now. But, anyhow, there it is."

Drake got up and looked out of the window. His back, as he stood there, expressed injury and indignation. It was the back of a man who had strained every nerve under false pretences. Bennett expressed his frame of mind by sharply changing the subject.

"We've got the Drill Hall for to-night," he said. "You will get a considerable crowd, and some little trouble. Master McClusky's gang from the distillery over the bridge have been getting ready for you."

"Let 'em come," said Gommie thoughtfully, pulling at his beard. "But that is no reason, you know," he went on, referring to what they had been talking about before, "why we shouldn't make the most of the wife's public position. What have you been doing to get the benefit of that?"

"Talking," put in Drake from the window. "What more can we do without a lead from the candidate?"

"And he doesn't give us any," put in Bennett significantly.

"He behaves," said Drake bitterly, "like a bally bachelor. There's nothing *to* do."

“ Oh, I think we might start something. Does he interfere much with the literature ? ”

“ He’s had seven proofs already of his election address,” said Drake ; “ and he’s written one or two leaflets that we don’t circulate. Too damn literary ! Beyond that he hasn’t worried himself. We get the stuff from head-quarters and send it out without showing it to him now. He said most of it made him sick, so I told him I’d take the responsibility. It doesn’t make me sick.”

“ Ah,” said Gommie. “ Well, in that case we needn’t consult him, which is just as well, perhaps.” He brought a packet out of an inside pocket and selected from it. “ Here are two or three things which may be useful,” he said, and put them on the table at Bennett’s elbow. One was an old-fashioned photograph of Mrs. Pargeter cut from an illustrated paper, another was a yellow newspaper cutting, and the third a typewritten sheet. Bennett picked up the photograph first.

“ This is what I’ve wanted from the first,” he said, “ but Pargeter said it wasn’t possible ; his wife hadn’t been photographed for twenty years—had a prejudice against it.”

“ As a matter of fact she has such a prejudice,” said Gommie ; “ but Pargeter forgot that one. She had it done for Her Majesty, by special request, the year of the Coronation, and one of the ladies’ papers got hold of it. *The Boudoir* it was. I’ve had a devil of a hunt for it, but I knew it was somewhere. We’ll do it with Pargeter’s, medallion style in five colours, large

size, and order five hundred. Can you run to that, Drake ? ”

Drake, looking already comforted, said he could.

“ It’s got to be designed,” said Clarence, “ with the little touch of sentiment we want, if anything, here more than they do elsewhere. Matrimonial sentiment.” Bennett nodded.

“ Yes,” he said, “ it goes down. What is this ? ”

“ An extract from a speech she made—I heard her read it—about seven years ago at a dinner given by the Outlook Society to Jaurés. She replied for the women Socialists of England. We can pick out the best of it. It will make up into a useful leaflet. “ What Mrs. Leland Pargeter Believes.”

“ Right-o,” said Drake.

“ And that is a paragraph for the *Herald*, sort of explaining why she’s keeping out of the way. She *has* heart trouble, right enough—my wife discovered it by accident a month or two ago. That’s for local consumption, and we’ll let off one or two more in London. The queer thing is the papers haven’t noticed it already and started explanations of their own. She’s a great lady, but the Press doesn’t seem to interest itself in her much. Well, those are my suggestions. So you think we may look out for squalls to-night ? ”

“ We’re ready for ’em,” said the revived Drake. “ We’ve got twenty-five able-bodied and conscientious stewards all determined to see fair

play. We got the men cheap too, considering the risk of arrest ; but the candidate——”

At a step that sounded on the stair the agent gathered up Mr. Gommie's suggestions and carefully pocketed them.

“ Here is the candidate,” said he, and they all looked at the door.

It opened in another instant to admit Pargerter, fresh and distinguished, perfectly gloved, tweeded, booted, and wearing the buttonhole of violets which had reached him with Flora Bellamy's love and best wishes by that morning's post.

“ Good morning, gentlemen,” he said, with the affability he was acquiring so fast as time went on. “ Isn't this place a bit stuffy ? Shall we inaugurate our deliberations by opening a window ? ”

.

It was two days after this consultation that Mr. Drake was further depressed by the sudden arrival upon the field of a Liberal candidate. Clarence Gommie had again gone North, and went further North when he heard it. Mr. Gommie's energy was too productive and too precious to waste upon any foregone conclusion. And elsewhere, far and near his practised eye saw that the fields were white already to harvest.

CHAPTER XVI

CAPTAIN ACOURT'S own constituency, a veritable old Conservative fort on the coast of Devon, had always been so safe that he could afford to devote most of his time to the general interests of his party. He was more available to speak in support of candidates and more useful in that capacity than most of the rank and file from which he was plainly emerging ; and the Central Committee had occasion oftener than once to acknowledge his services in other directions. If his manner was cold, his facts were convincing, and there was a sense of force in reserve about him that gave him command of audiences that more pleasing speakers found difficult. He carried surprising weight in the party for so young a man ; his discretion was unfathomable, and he could be trusted with the most delicate and complicated negotiations. He had one in hand at the moment which, for the first time in his management of such things, he was beginning to find too delicate and too complicated. And he was being pressed to bring it to completion.

The new land policy of the Conservatives had done more perhaps than anything else to bring Mary Pargeter, whose importance had so little relation to any vote she ever might or might not

have, over to their way of political thinking. Mary's Socialism had never really carried her down into the dregs. She stopped now at the establishment by the State of the peasant proprietor, recognising with relief that there was a point below which the human mass would not disintegrate, and could only be taken care of, disciplined, and left to the beneficent working of the laws of nature. Her heart warmed to the peasant proprietor; she saw him the rightful lover, the rightful owner of his fields, and there was just enough class sacrifice in the idea of compulsory sale on his behalf to give her the feeling that it sprang, after all, from the principles she had inherited. Her heart warmed to the peasant proprietor, and when Mary's heart warmed it was always with the desire in some way to promote and foster, some way that would involve the intelligent use of large sums of money. Whatever people found to say afterwards, the truth is that the Agricultural Development Trust Fund, the scheme which she and Percy Acourt had worked out together, originated in Mary's own impulse in this direction, which Acourt had not been slow to turn to account. She had seen it, constructively, first, and had invited his ready attention. Only gradually, as Mary's rather slow mind grew firmer in the tenets of its adoption, did he show her the political aspects and values of their project. These, as she took them in, added plainly to her pleasure in it. She rejoiced in her new identification with the

objects he was pledged to. It grew in her private heart to be the great importance of her life ; and this was a lady who had always, with good reason, taken herself seriously.

The scheme for the Agricultural Development Trust Fund, provisional as it was, and contingent upon the sanction, at the polls, of the land policy out of which it had grown and could only be attached, was very nearly complete, but not quite. Mary was a woman of business ; there were details upon which she had yet to be satisfied. And the time was growing short ; Acourt was being pressed. Norreys, in particular, was pressing him. A week had gone by since he sat in thought on the Bayswater side of the Park ; and he had not yet presented himself in Arlington Street. He was held back by intolerable uncertainty. Fifty scruples, fears, and reticences had been awakened in him by Norreys' tale, scruples, fears, and reticences that had only slept in his soul before. Something else woke, too, that had been sleeping there—the sense of an extraordinary chance, a great and dazzling chance, the same flash from fortune's lamp that had flooded the mind of Leland Pargeter fourteen years before. That Pargeter had taken it, made nothing of it, and was now flinging it from him, was no indication of what Acourt might do with it. And one must remember that Pargeter had been free, while behind every perplexed glance that Acourt turned upon life lurked the consciousness of his passion for another woman. Pargeter had

no dilemma ; he had only to go straight forward to his undoing. Being an artist in life, a dilemma would have saved him ; he would have made his choice without thinking twice about it, and it would not have been Mary Lossel. Acourt was not an artist in life. He was endowed instead with a passion for the great game with its great labours, and a practically unselfish sense of opportunity, a sense of opportunity which was now for the first time in his career very much in his way.

He listened for the tale again, heard it by allusion, felt it gathering circumstantiality and a stronger wing. Once he saw it die upon a man's lips as he approached—he could have finished the fellow's sentence for him as he turned with outward indifference and inward fury upon his heel, so familiar was he in thought with the things people might be saying. He had virtuous moments of conviction that it was only a tale, and guilty ones of knowledge that it might be true—times when he felt with relief that it was impossible, and times when he eagerly pieced together the evidence to establish it. One thing definitely emerged in his mind ; it was the hope that Pamela had heard nothing about it. She was out of town, well involved by now in affairs at High Pollard ; and London gossip dies before its ripples strike the suburbs even. It was very undesirable indeed that Pamela should hear, and, he recognised with relief, very unlikely. So he revolved his dilemma, keeping out of the way of people who

might ask questions. The scheme, of course, was at a standstill. He waited, day by day, for a line or message from Mary which would leave him no alternative but to go to her, but it did not come. She, who sent for all the world, had no summons for him. He came at his sovereign pleasure.

When at last he went, he chose a Wednesday, late, when people would have gone. As a matter of fact, he met the Dean of Westminster on the steps, and thought they had; the Dean so often balanced his gaiters on Mary's hearthrug till the very end. It looked as if he had done so this time; Mrs. Pargeter seemed alone in the drawing-room as Captain Acourt crossed it. She was sitting by the fire, with one hand lying in her lap and the other in the possession of a slight figure that rested against her skirts on the hearthrug. Mary seemed to have but a listless attention for what Lady Flora was saying, if, indeed, anything was being said; she was looking tired and absent, with her eyes fixed on the fire. Acourt might have noticed, when he caught sight of her companion, that Mrs. Pargeter had a statelier and graver air by contrast with the abandon of the half-crouching figure and upturned childish face in its mass of framing hair; but he was too displeased to notice anything beyond its presence. He disliked Flora; she revolted every instinct in him. He stiffened at the sight of her, hesitated, and came on with plain reluctance. But she gave him no chance to make further hint of it.

"Ah, here is Captain Acourt!" she cried, springing up. "We were just talking of you, weren't we, Mrs. Pargeter?"

"Yes, we were," said Mary, as she gave him her hand, half rising to do so, in sign that she had not seen him for a week. Nor was that for a quick eye the only betrayal.

"We were talking about your wonderful future," went on Lady Flora, patting her skirts into order, "and here you come looking as portentous as if you knew all about it. But I know you'll never tell while I am here, so, dearest lady, I fly."

"Must you?" asked Mary, while Acourt waited ceremoniously, with his hand on the back of a chair, for the pending departure that made it not quite worth while to sit down.

The answer was a butterfly kiss on her forehead that added at least five years to the difference in age between her and her little friend.

"I must," said Lady Flora, "and thank you for my lovely, lovely day. She has been simply mobbed, Captain Acourt. She is completely exhausted. I hope you have no very exciting secrets for her."

Acourt's reply to this sally was to bow gravely, and to watch Lady Flora's graceful progress out of the room.

"She's been lunching with me," Mary told him, as the door closed. It was like an apology.

"You are most kind to her. I hope she rewards your goodness," said Acourt.

"Oh, indeed she does. And the kindness is

hers, really, to come to me when I have to receive a lot of people about whom she can't particularly care. The Portmores came to-day; and Flora was charming to the Duchess, who is really not easy, you know, with her ear trumpet. I had no idea how much I relied upon Pamela."

Just for an instant it seemed as if the last words had escaped by a kind of awkward accident and lay between them, as it were, on the floor. Then Acourt, with an effort, picked them up.

"Miss Pargeter is always——"

"In High Pollard; yes. I hear she is working very hard."

They could share their regret that Pamela was working very hard. They exchanged glances charged with it.

"I have not seen her, or heard from her, for quite six weeks," Mary added. "I am afraid she takes things very much to heart."

"Nor I," said Acourt hastily. "I am afraid she does."

He had not seen Pamela for quite six weeks either; it wonderfully cleared the air. So far as Pamela was concerned they were in the same mood, in the same boat, at least for the moment.

"It is the thing," said Mary, "that I feel most keenly about in this whole wretched business of Leland's candidature—the pain I must have given to Pamela. I would have done almost anything to avoid that."

There was a little pause, and then Mrs. Pargeter said:

“ You have been having more trouble with the Treasury ? ”

“ Oh, no—well, yes.” Acourt corrected himself, suddenly mindful of the days that had passed. “ Radford is inclined to boggle at the guarantee clauses. He takes this view,” and he expounded Radford’s view. Mary heard him with the careful attention she might have bestowed on the agent of an Argentine railway negotiating a loan. She could not agree with Radford, explaining why.

“ But, after all, Treasury objections, as I have said all along,” Acourt told her, “ are practically negligible by us. All we want from them is a general provisional acceptance of the scheme—something like an acknowledgment of its soundness. When it comes to working out the details, they will be obliged to accept our—your terms. The permanent official is troublesome, but he is in no sense a dictator ; his business is to do his best with what is given him.”

“ But up to what point can he give trouble ? ” asked Mary. “ I could not pledge myself——”

“ Calthorpe will guarantee your conditions.”

“ He was here to-day,” said Mary, “ and I gathered as much. He said just a word or two.”

Captain Acourt looked slightly displeased. His leader was not supposed, in this matter, to meddle, only, a little later, to reap.

“ He will guarantee them gladly. And well he may. I have heard again from Lord Comynge ;

he now practically pledges the co-operation of the Land Distribution Society in every possible way. Their machinery will suit us better than the Small Farms Union's, though the Union is so anxious to come in that I begin to think some measure of amalgamation with outstanding Associations under our—your scheme quite practicable."

"And the National Land people?" asked Mary.

"Quite hopeless. Their mouths water, but they are tied hand and foot to the District Boards. They can't look at us. They are bound indeed, to fight our freehold principle to the end."

"I am glad you have won over Lord Comynge," said Mary suddenly. "It wasn't quite to be taken for granted. My grandfather ruined his. Now that he wants to sell and take his family, as I hear, to Canada, I should like to buy every rood of his land for our scheme."

"He does want to sell, of course," said Acourt, eyeing her curiously, "and to go to Canada. I wonder how long it will be," he added sombrely, "before you will overtake him there."

It was a Norman arrow, as old as Agincourt, but it deflected easily from the beautiful bosom of this last of the very successful house of Lossel. She smiled and said, "Oh, no. We are too happy in England."

"You personally?" he asked.

"I was thinking of my race," she told him.

"No, personally I think I am not happy."

He felt suddenly like the bather who takes the one step that carries him out of his depth. But something buoyed him up, a compelling curiosity, almost a necessity to know, and he let go his footing and struck out boldly.

"That does not surprise me. Happiness in your situation—is it imaginable? But I hear you mean at least to be free."

It was like a pistol-shot in the room. It was like that even to him, when he had said it.

Mrs. Pargeter sat quite still. She did not even lift her head to look at him, but replied with her eyes still on the fire.

"You frighten me. You *hear*?"

"I assure you it is being said."

Still Mary kept her lowered lids. She seemed to grow, as she sat, more motionless.

"I suppose sooner or later it was bound to be said," she replied at last, in tones so low that he hardly heard her.

Acourt's next words were dictated by an impulse that suddenly enforced itself in him stronger than he was, an impulse that bade him improve his opportunity while it lay before him, whatever he meant to do with it later.

"I think the world is justified in its guess," he said hurriedly. "Any other woman would have done it long ago. Any other woman but you, Mary. You certainly owe it to yourself. I am not sure that you do not owe it to society. And it would present the least possible difficulty; the suit would in all probability be undefended."

“ Oh, yes, I have known that for a long time. But how do you know it, Percy ? ”

“ One draws irresistible conclusions. Then you *have* thought of that course ? ”

“ I have often thought of it.”

The pause that ensued seemed to strangle the direct question that trembled on Acourt's lips. It was a great thing to know that Mary had often thought of it, a startling thing as well ; but it was not all. He let her impose silence upon him for a moment. Then he fought down his own reticence and affronted hers.

“ Will you allow me to ask what I am to say when I hear these reports.”

At that she lifted her eyes and they rested on him with a steady regard. It must have been plain enough to her that he asked for his own information.

“ Please say nothing,” she said, and picked up the final notes he had brought her regarding the matter of business between them.

“ Then you can assure me,” she went on, “ that I shall not find myself in a false or untenable position in any of the respects we have discussed, should the general terms of my offer be accepted by your Government in the event of its returning to power.”

The check brought all his caution flying back to him. He plunged immediately into Calthorpe's provisional sanctions, guarantees, and conditions, and took a long inward breath as he found the ground again under his feet.

"Of course it would be a Cabinet matter," he said, "and equally, of course, you would be entitled to withdraw should any point in your scheme be interpreted, under detailed criticism—"

"No," she interrupted, "I could not—I would not withdraw."

"Oh, don't say that—in advance," he checked her, and added kindly, "Sometimes, Mary, you are very like a woman."

"Am I?" she retorted. "How extraordinary!" But her face clouded, and the attention she gave him after that was less alert.

Twenty minutes later he looked at his watch—he was dining with Calthorpe, and Norreys would be there.

"Then we all see our way," he said, with the smile that so redeemed him, "and your magnificent offer to finance our Central Bank is at the option of the country. Will you allow us to say so?"

Mary pondered for a moment while Captain Acourt picked up his gloves and waited.

"I see no objection," she said slowly. "My old friends will love me perhaps rather the less for it; but——"

"But your new ones, dear lady, will adore you the more," said Acourt quickly.

At that something gave way in her. "Ah, don't!" she exclaimed, almost with grief. She rose and looked at him uncertainly; her eyes were blurred. Acourt dropped his own before them.

“ I am very sorry,” he faltered, “ Believe me, I only meant——”

But with a murmur she had gone, leaving him to contemplate, from the point of view of his party, his singularly fortunate achievement.

CHAPTER XVII

SO it was all settled and done, and they would publish it. To Mary, in the quiet of her own room, it seemed that much, that almost everything had come to an end with the close of these preliminary discussions with Percy. The matter would now pass out of his hands, where its importance had been so thrilling, into the hands of others, who would manipulate it frankly in the interests of a party and a policy. It would be published, flung like a bone into the market-place; she could see the suspicious gathering of the dogs to sniff it. There would be a chorus of critical howling; she must be prepared for that. Her motives might be questioned—was there any end to the imputations possible in party warfare? The scheme would be riddled, derided, torn to pieces by the other side. There would be disapproval on both sides of the compulsory selling; and Mrs. Pargeter could quite clearly see herself held up as a comparatively landless plutocrat exploiting a charitable instinct at the expense of other people. She clung breathlessly to these reflections, trying desperately not to think of the other thing.

Well, so far as she was concerned it was all

settled and done. She could put it down, like a load from her shoulders. She did put it down, realising when the weight was loosed that she was very tired. Too tired, almost, to rest.

Yes, let them publish it. She was absolutely firm about the line she wanted her influence to take; and for the rest she found herself indifferent. The magic had faded out of the scheme; it stood there in the room with her, a possible transaction. How alone she was in the world, with her transactions! They were not tender companions. Mary never reproached them, but she sometimes sent them away.

To-night neither the Agricultural Development Trust scheme nor any other project could make more than a pretence at engaging her mind; though she made a great effort to hold out behind these defences against the tide that bore down upon her with the thought of Percy Acourt's deliberate urging of the thing from which she had so firmly hitherto turned away. She was prudent to look for defences. The remembrance literally and physically shook her; she lay upon her sofa and fought it, coming through with a look of sharp illness.

"If I had done it ten years ago," she murmured, "when perhaps I ought—and this is a punishment. But now—I daren't—I daren't."

Then she lay for a while very still, probing the matter.

"If I thought he had any love for me at all," she said aloud, "I would do it—yes, I would do it. But God knows he has not."

She had come to that pass and she acknowledged it distinctly in the empty room. She held out her hand to happiness, with an "if" in it. She was very hard pressed; and her own voice spoke with comfort to her. In all her lonely life she had never "talked to herself" before; but now she did, aloud and in whispers, and listened, as if to the counsel of a friend, and after a while slept.

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It was Norreys, naturally Norreys in the *Constitution*, who gave the Agricultural Development Trust Fund to the world, Norreys who alone could fit it forth with the felicities of phrase that it so eminently demanded and deserved. To Norreys alone could be entrusted the task of drawing the vivid distinction that had to be drawn, between a great and shining reward for the victory of one set of political ideas, and a vast and flagrant bribe to the constituencies at large. And Norreys threw himself with ardour upon the privilege. In the announcement, brief but leaded, that shone like a star of hope in the middle of the third page, in the detailed outline of the scheme that the reader would find elsewhere, in the leading article which expanded and gloried in it, in the short paragraphs which went off down the next column like a salvo to the leading article, the Agricultural Trust Fund had as imposing a début as had ever been conceived for a proposal originating in the private munificence of a subject of the

realm. The name of the Honourable Mrs. Pargeter was written larger upon the national consciousness than it had ever been written before, and written in characters which reconciled in themselves the task—Norreys only again—of being unmistakably Conservative and notably progressive. The *Constitution* was a Sunday paper; there was a dignity, a discreet effectiveness, in making the announcement through the *Constitution*. No assorted fanfare of acclaim, but a single, distinguished note that could be taken up with blare enough next day. Acourt had gone down to Blackport to avoid the congratulations of the initiated, but Mr. Calthorpe, dining that night with his dear old friend the Speaker, was very sunny. It was Lady Garside who told Ashley Venn what really lay behind the announcement; politics, especially Tory politics, had no curtains for Lady Garside. It was a pity that the social world of London was so largely helping its friends to canvass in the country; but there were quite enough people in town to make Mary Pargeter's divorce almost an accomplished fact before midnight.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE *Constitution* was a Sunday paper, and therefore difficult to procure in the country. On Sunday morning you walked to the railway station instead, perhaps, of going to church, proposing to pick up your *Constitution* at the news stall on the platform, and as a rule you were disappointed. More democratic sheets were offered you, tempting with the cream of the week's crime, but not the *Constitution*. If you hated not having it, as Pamela Pargeter did, you bribed the guard of an early train to bring it from town for you. Pamela was of those who made chaplets of bays for the brows of Walter Norreys. She still made them, once a week at all events, when the guard of the 9.15 mixed from Paddington brought her the *Constitution* and she gave herself the luxury and excitement of an hour among the arguments and the opinions to which her private soul assented. Just for that one hour every week she was back again in the camp of Percy Acourt and his friends, tracing his influence, watching the trend of the policy to which he was committed, rejoicing in Norreys. Then she gave the *Constitution* to her landlady to light the fire with, and arranged for the

unvisited cottages in the lanes behind the soap factory.

It was an indulgence, but it was not all a luxury. Pamela was suffering a good deal in the region of her conscience and her honour; and the *Constitution* reminded her every Sunday that it was right and proper that she should suffer. It was of little use to tell herself, as she did at first, that she was a mere gramophone for her father's tunes—a gramophone didn't sing one thing and think another. Pamela found, too, that the records were beginning to trouble her. She was proving in experience what she had flung at Acourt in bravado, that all the truth could never be on one side of a campaign, and all the sophistries on the other: it was an embarrassing thing to have found out. Her mind would never be won either to the proposals or the methods of Socialism; but her heart shook before her new vision of its claim. So she had lost in spite of her, her single heart; and her own fault had tripped her, girl as she was, among the stumbling-blocks of all honest politicians.

The writs were out; High Pollard would poll on the Wednesday of the following week—in ten days' time. Everything would be settled for the country in a fortnight, for Leland Pargeter in ten days' time. Pamela was divided between impatience for the date and dread of its arrival. In any mood she refused to look beyond it; and when her intelligence began to feel short-sighted she prescribed to herself a fresh packet

of election tracts and a remote district to distribute them in. After all, she told herself, she was fighting less for her father's success at the polls than for the defeat of her stepmother there, in her monstrous unnatural position of tacit hostility. That a woman, that a wife, should be permitted to triumph in a design so cynical—one could only abhor, and slave.

Pamela always went to the station for her own *Constitution*. She liked the quiet walk through the little resting town, unvexed so early even by the church bells; the Sunday truce was grateful to her. On this particular Sunday she felt as she went down Mrs. James's steps that it would be delicious. Snow had fallen in the night, the air was crisp and gentle. The canal on the edge of the common gave back a blue glance to the sky, and a fir plantation on the other side of it pricked pleasantly against the white fields of the Tyrrell property. The clustering half-timbered houses in the High Street, that twisted off to the right at the gate of her lodging, gave to High Pollard the look of a tranquil Christmas card, which the little red public house at the cross-roads helped to brighten. You could look that way and see hardly a factory chimney. The railway station was at the other end of the High Street. You could go direct, or as direct as that thoroughfare would lead you, or you could take the path across the fields to the road under the railway bridge that arched so agreeably in the snowy landscape. It was a little longer, but it looked even more attractive,

and Pamela, glancing at her watch, gave it the preference.

On Saturday a new lot of literature had arrived from head-quarters; and Drake had sent her a bundle late the night before with a line urging her to get it put about with as little delay as possible. Remembering that she would pass the Recreation Club and Miss Wharton's she took a couple of packages now, in her hand. She would drop half a dozen at the Recreation Club and the rest with Miss Wharton, who would know so well what to do with them. The rest she would see to on Monday, but Miss Wharton in her enthusiasm did Sunday visiting as well.

The snow on the path across the fields was light and untravelled; only one workman's tread had preceded her, and beside it the trotting footsteps of a child. Pamela wondered as she followed in the tracks, whether they were those of old Gibbon, the jobbing gardener, and his little girl. Old Gibbon had voted Conservative for thirty-five years; he had jobbed at Hareham off and on for only twenty; and he made a great mystery of his intentions. Pamela had seen them pass her window a few minutes before she started. Involuntarily, with the pursuer's instinct for the quarry, she quickened her pace. She had one word more to say to old Gibbon. Looking across the field she saw that the new hoardings were up—that was smart of Drake. There they were in the principal angle of the cross-roads, on Miller's land. Had Drake

then come to terms with Miller, or had Miller come to terms with Drake? Even from that distance she could see that they were very gay, very effective. Two or three people as she looked stopped to consider them. A youth slouching by with his hands in his pockets, observing that they were new and expensive and that no one was near, worked up a corner and inflicted a long diagonal gash. At that Pamela hurried faster. Two figures were approaching on the Wortley End road—she knew them, the curate, Mr. Boys, and his sister, Miss Angela Boys, on their way home from an early service. They reached the placards before she did and stood in front of them in plain admiration.

“At last!” said the Rev. Boys as Pamela came up. “At last, Miss Pargeter. And none too soon.”

“At last!” echoed Miss Angela Boys.

Mr. Boys pointed as he spoke with his stick to the hoarding, which bore a new and striking portrait of Mr. Pargeter, represented as occupying one side of an old-fashioned oval locket, wide open to display on the other side the vivid counterfeit of a lady whom at first Pamela hardly recognised. The locket hung by a lover’s knot of brightest blue, the names of Mr. and Mrs. Leland Pargeter were duly printed under the portraits; and the electors of High Pollard were invited in very large letters to “VOTE FOR THE HUSBAND OF THE NOBLEST WOMAN IN ALL ENGLAND.” Other admonitions were there, but none, to Pamela’s eye, more explicit. She

stared at that until Miss Boys' look of slight surprise recalled her to her manners.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Boys!" she said, and looked again, quelled and silent, at the poster.

"It isn't *very* like," said Miss Boys putting up her eye-glasses. "But how the people will love it, dear Miss Pargeter, and what competition there will be for it among the cottages. I do hope there is a liberal supply."

"No," said Pamela. "It's not very like."

The portrait of their candidate was extremely like, but nobody misunderstood.

"It's like enough to influence a great many doubting minds," said her brother. "It may just turn the scale."

"I suppose it may," replied Pamela, eyeing the lover's knot.

"And the locket—how original and charming! How *rococo*!" approved Miss Boys. "Was the locket *your* idea, Miss Pargeter?"

"I don't know whose idea it was. No, not mine, certainly. Yes, I was going this way, but—yes, do let us go on together. My father was so grateful, Mr. Boys, for your help last week. That horrible bell! Did you ever hear such a bell! If it had not been for you I am afraid my father would have struck against any more open-air meetings. He is still on the point of it."

Pamela's eye ranged the outskirts of the town as she spoke, for more locket portraits, while her thought within her made a dozen demands at

once. Was it possible, conceivable, that her step-mother had at the last moment come round ! Had there been anything like a reconciliation ? She found herself cold as ice to the idea. But without that, Leland was sunk indeed if he could have consented to anything so grovelling as this poster. And even *with* it— ! She stared, revolted, at the effective pink cheeks of her stepmother. And now who was to be held responsible—she must hold somebody responsible—and what was to be done ? Where at that moment should she find Drake ? Oh, for five minutes with Drake ! A dreadful suspicion visited her—were they the victims of a practical joke ? No, she dismissed it as too subtle, too cruel, and futile besides. Be sure the thing would be on the walls of the railway bridge ; she could see it already, more vivid, more appealing, more atrocious than ever. How ridiculous they had made her stepmother's cheeks !

She found herself paying no attention to what Miss Boys was saying, and she ought to be paying attention, because it was something important, something about the bishop.

"The old man declares that if it occurs again he will be obliged to treat it very seriously," Miss Boys was saying with rejoicing, and her smile was reflected on the features, so like hers, of her brother.

"If what occurs again ? " asked Pamela.

"Freddy's taking part in a political meeting, particularly as chucker-out. I was talking about the Crow's Hatch meeting which, unluckily for

Freddy, got into the London papers. You tell, Freddy."

"My sister refers to Bishop Wardle's well-known dislike of Socialistic doctrine," said Mr. Boys with relish, "but I purpose to retain my liberty of conscience and my small hold upon the people. Considering that a positively anti-Socialist prayer will be offered up in all the Catholic churches of England on the Sunday before the election—I've had notice of it—I purpose to do whatever a priest can on the other side. But we don't say 'chucker-out,' Angela. 'Steward' is the word to employ. It looks much better in the papers. I shall continue to be at Mr. Pargeter's service as steward as long as he wants me."

"And suppose you are disfrocked, Freddy?" rejoined his sister.

"There are always the monastic societies," replied Mr. Boys, with a side glance at Pamela, to which, at last, she responded.

"Oh, I hope it won't come to that, Mr. Boys. And I do trust that the ecclesiastical authorities will be worsted in this matter of the political rights of priests. The chapels are free enough."

They were passing one at that moment. The red brick semi-detached house next door to it blazed with the colours and shouted the propaganda of the newly arrived Liberal candidate. Upstairs and downstairs the front windows exposed his portrait, and each post of the garden gates besought the passer-by to "Vote for Bersteiner." A line of outhouses at

the side even lent a backing to the comic poster of the Liberal John Bull dismissing the appeal of a coroneted spaniel on the one hand, and an impudent vagrant on the other, which enlivened most of the three-cornered contests of the year.

"The pastor's house," said Mr. Boys. "His idea of feeding his lambs. Well, it is an influence, and, in a degree, worth imitating. I shall ask for these charming portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Pargeter, and hang them out, flag-wise, over our cottage gate. What do you say, Angela?"

But Miss Pargeter gave Angela no chance to reply.

"Oh, don't, Mr. Boys!" she exclaimed. "Please—I mean I don't think it would be practicable. Think of the wind!"

"There is that, of course," said the curate. "We must negotiate the wind. Couldn't it be done, Angela, somehow with buckram? Ah! Here is some of the true blue."

They looked, as they passed, at the public-house over the way, which made a brave display, on crossed Union Jacks, of the features of Sir Hugh Tyrrell.

"I heard their young Canadian speak last night at the Town Hall," went on Mr. Boys. "He made quite a good impression. We must admit that it is easier to conjure with an Empire than with a World-State!" he sighed; "But the larger idea will come, and even the villas will receive it. What have you there that is new, Miss Pamela?"

Pamela broke the string of one of the packages.

"I'm ashamed to say I haven't looked," she said. "More ammunition from Mr. Drake."

She handed a specimen leaflet to her friends as she spoke, and opened one herself. It was headed "WHAT MRS. PARGETER BELIEVES."

"Excellent!" said Mr. Boys, reading, "'The destiny of the race is a common destiny, and none can escape it'—how true that is."

"Oh, yes!" cried his sister Angela; "but this is even better. 'There is a sense in which society is responsible for poverty, for ignorance, for unemployment, even for crime, and so long as wealth and work, intelligence and virtue are unevenly divided among the people it cannot shirk that responsibility.' Oh, Freddy, it's just the word you were saying we wanted from her, isn't it?"

"It's as good as a definite pronouncement on the Continuous Wage Bill," said Mr. Boys, stopping in the road to read. "Ah, is this your turning, Miss Pargeter? You said you were going to drop these at the Recreation Club—and with Miss Wharton? I lecture there this afternoon—can I distribute them then, and save you the trouble? Miss Wharton, I believe, will be there—I can hand her the residue."

Mr. Boys blushed slightly as he spoke, having the best reason for supposing that Miss Wharton would be there, but Pamela did not observe it.

"Oh, do take them—take them all!" she said. "And can you tell me, Mr. Boys, whether

the motor omnibus runs to Worsham on Sunday ? ”

Mr. Boys, pocketing the packages, said he was afraid not.

“ I couldn’t bicycle in the snow, could I ? ” demanded Pamela. “ I must wait until to-morrow. Oh, no—nothing important ! I can very well wait until to-morrow. Good-bye, Miss Boys. ”

It was extraordinarily puzzling, the tract on top of the picture ; but she need not, after all, spoil her Sunday reprieve with it. To-morrow she would find out everything, but she would wait until to-morrow.

Then, as the 9.15 from Paddington was already signalled, she hurried round the bend of the road to the station. Hail, Norreys, and the air that blew in her own camp ! A few minutes later she received the *Constitution*, that vivid and triumphant issue of which we know, which published the scheme for the Agricultural Development Trust Fund to all the world, and the affichement of Mary Pargeter’s adhesion to the principles and practice of the Conservative Party.

Pamela, opening the paper for a glance at the headlines as she turned homeward, stood petrified, read on, and whitened as she read. Then she turned and went swiftly into the stable-yard of the Tyrrell Arms, the little hotel within a stone’s throw of the station.

“ I want a fly,” she said to the ostler there, “ to take me to Worsham. Yes, I’ll arrange at

the office ; but please put your horse in at once."

It would cost fifteen shillings ; did it matter what it cost ? There was no other way of going.

CHAPTER XIX

LADY FLORA BELLAMY was a great consumer of newspapers, and the *Constitution* naturally came up with her tea and toast every Sunday morning that found her in town. Lady Flora had now definitely thrown in her lot with the people, and meant, as soon as the election was over and things had settled down a little, to take a cottage somewhere and devote herself to them. In the meantime, she had not given up the *Constitution*, though it was far from representing the views of the masses who had become so dear to her. There was always some of it that she understood, and she was excited even by what she did not understand. In that way it had much the same effect upon her as the electric battery of her hair-specialist. It was as agreeable, and therefore as indispensable. Flora had gone to bed depressed and miserable, and had recourse twice to the little friend on her dressing-table before she slept. After that she had a perfect night, and was ready for her breakfast, ready for the *Constitution*, ready for the world. Her eyes were large and bright as she sat up in bed and called Christine a love for letting in so much sunshine. She was strung up to vibrate to anything when she opened the

Constitution. And there she found, indeed, something to vibrate to.

Three-quarters of an hour later she was sitting in her motor travelling fast out of London by one of its great highways to the West. She looked very charming in the ermine furs that were so becoming to her. In the big fashionable muff that lay lightly in her lap she grasped very tightly her copy of the *Constitution*; her cheeks were coloured high with the purpose on which her eyes were concentrated. Lady Flora was as happy as it was possible for her to be. She thought herself full of concern, of acute apprehension about an event of public importance, involving the paramount interest of a distinguished friend. In reality she was enjoying a very vivid and dramatic sensation, and the opportunity of identifying herself with it. She was making herself its conductor; she was going to pass it on. "He must know at once, and I must tell him!" had been her instant thought as she lay amongst her pillows and realised the significance of Norreys' head-lines; more than that she had not yet taken in. It was three hours and a half from London to Worsham. There would be plenty of time in the motor to find out what Mrs. Pargeter and the Conservative Party really proposed to do. Meanwhile, Leland, breakfasting in Worsham, must be unaware. *He* had not clung to the *Constitution*; he had always disliked Norreys, and his disproportionate political influence as a journalist. Besides, there was no Sunday morning post from

London. A telegram from the central office was possible, but unlikely—who would send it? Pamela was in High Pollard, Clarence Gommie, she remembered, was in Manchester. Who would take the trouble, the responsibility, the liberty? No—Leland must be unconscious—he must! She would be too furious if she found he was not. And how dramatic, how opportune would be her arrival! Leland did not always take her very seriously; but at least he would confess that she could rise to an emergency—to what end Flora did not consider.

After the first hour the stimulus of her adventure flagged a little, and she opened the *Constitution*. But as they drew further north the roads grew ridgey with frost and the print danced. She put up her lorgnette; but the wind came in and flapped the sheets; she was presently certain that she would get a headache if she went on with it. By noon she remembered that she had not breakfasted properly, but she did not think for a moment of stopping; that would damage the effect of her arrowy flight to Leland with the news. When, twenty miles from Worsham, something went wrong with the motor, she was querulously unreasonable to the chauffeur; and she made the end of her expedition cold and miserable in her corner. Nearing the town she rallied, and looked out with excitement. This, then, was the actual scene of Leland's contest! She drew a thrill from it, caught sight of a bill-board, and felt her heart beat more quickly.

“Leland Pargeter’s Committee Room” in bold, red letters over the door of a scrubby little house in the outskirts turned the thrill into a flutter.

“He will find that he made a mistake to leave me out of it,” she said to herself, tasting the forbidden joys of the campaign. She was full of impatience before they arrived; they were badly directed and had to make several inquiries. It seemed to Flora that the group of working men who were the last to send them on their way did it with anything but friendly looks. At last, however, the motor stopped before the elaborate iron fence that helped the shrubbery to shut off Leland Pargeter’s abode from the world. The gate was open, and as Flora went up the path, she saw fresh tracks in the snow before her, and a bicycle leaning against the steps. She rang the bell hastily—had somebody else brought the *Constitution*?

An elderly woman of very non-committal aspect opened the door, and surveyed Flora with suspicion.

“Mr. Pargeter ain’t in, miss,” she said, and would have closed it forthwith.

“Oh, do you know, I think he must be!” Flora said prettily; “and I have come all the way from town to see him. If he really isn’t, I’ll wait.”

At that the housekeeper looked frankly indignant and alarmed.

“He ain’t in, miss, to nobody!” she said. “The orders is very pertickler.”

"My dear thing, just give him that," said Flora, producing a visiting-card, "and I do not think he will be vexed with you."

The servant looked at it, gasped uncertainly, and Flora gently pushed her into the hall. Voices came from a room to the right with the door open, Leland Pargeter's voice and Drake's. Flora put up her finger for an instant, and listened. No, they were talking in ordinary tones about ordinary matters—she had not been forestalled. "Never mind announcing me," she said, and, waving back the vacillating house-keeper, she took two quick steps across the hall and stood in the library door.

Pargeter and Drake looked up from their papers together, and Pargeter said "Damn!" Drake certainly heard him say it, though Flora probably did not. In another instant he was extending an astonished and embarrassed welcome to her, had indicated a chair, the fire, Drake, who looked at him with uncertainty, and got up.

"No, Drake—you must not go! Lady Flora is—is one of our workers—a political ally and a great friend of my wife's," he added hastily. "You have not come to tell me that Mary is ill?" he improvised.

Lady Flora, ignoring the chair, advanced to the table.

"No," she said, "I bring you news of Mrs. Pargeter, but not that news."

"What news, then, in Heaven's name?" exclaimed Pargeter.

"She has dealt you a blow," said Lady Flora,

holding out the *Constitution*. "It's in that. Read it, and then you can give me a glass of wine if you like, Leland."

The agent seized the paper while Pargeter gave a quick order to the housekeeper, who still hovered in the hall. Drake spread the sheets out on the table and the men stooped over them together. Flora, watching them, sank into a chair and put a pair of numb and high-heeled feet upon the fender.

"It's simply a thunderbolt, is it not?" she said.

Neither of them answered her; their eyes and minds were busy on the page. The housekeeper came in with a decanter and biscuits; Flora ate and drank in their strained attention to the newspaper. Pargeter was the first to leave it. He thrust his hands into his pockets and began to walk up and down the room.

"He's very clever—the fellow who brought that off," he said, rather to himself than to either of the others.

"Percy Acourt," said Flora intelligently from the fire; but Pargeter did not reply. He looked weary and indifferent; even his sneer was perfunctory.

Drake glanced at him, pale with dismay.

"This will have a very bad effect, sir," he said.

"Oh, a rotten effect—if Tyrrell knows how to use it."

"Shall you take any steps, sir? Can it be denied or attenuated in any way?"

“What steps are there to take?” demanded Pargeter. “Deny what? It’s the blaring truth; I shall ignore it.”

“I wish we had Bennett here!” said the agent. “Shall I go and get him?”

“If you please,” said Lady Flora, “may I stay to lunch? I’m half frozen.”

The sharp claiming note went home to Pargeter, and he wheeled round with compunction.

“Dear lady, you must be. Naturally”—he hesitated, nevertheless—“naturally, you must stay. Yes, Drake, go and get hold of Bennett. Bring him here to lunch,” he added, as Drake picked up his hat. “And—and Mrs. Bennett, if she’ll come.”

“He has dinner at twelve,” said the agent, looking at his watch. “It’s one now.”

He had reached the door, and Pargeter stepped out with him in the hall to reply. When he came back Flora had taken off her furs and was arranging her hair before a bit of glass upon the wall.

“Why did you ask that odious man to go and bring another odious man to lunch?” she demanded, pinning her hat at a more becoming angle. “I didn’t think it of you, Leland.”

“My dear child,” replied Pargeter; “they are both as odious as ever you like, but can’t you realise that I am asking a whole constituency of odious people to send me to Parliament, and that—we are not in London?”

“Oh, propriety!”

“If I confess to you that you are not the only

charming friend who has sought me out in this retreat—forgetting that I have retired into publicity——”

“ Oh, par exemple——”

“ Well, what do you think of Phyllis Faye arriving with her maid at ten o'clock at night from Reading, where she was touring with her company ? The dear creature had a night off, and most delightfully wanted to spend it under my roof. She did, too, and it is still my pious hope that Bennett doesn't know.”

“ Who is Bennett ? ” asked Flora coldly. Miss Phyllis Faye was not a person whose conduct could be agreeably compared with that of Lady Flora Bellamy. Lady Flora asked who Bennett was to gain time in which to say so.

“ Bennett is my party chairman, my sponsor, my apologist, my *alter ego*, my perpetual reference, my body of this death,” said Pargeter. “ I hope to heaven Drake will find him, but some brutes of brickmakers are making trouble, and he may be in a village six miles off. Do sit down.”

“ Please tell me the news, Leland. Your letters have been the scrappiest things.”

“ Mr. St. John Bersteiner's the only news. You've heard of the Liberals running a man of their own, at the eleventh hour. I don't much mind—not as much, I believe, as Tyrrell does—but it makes complications. What is *your* news ? ”

“ Oh, people are fearfully excited over your clearing so completely out of Arlington Street.”

Pargeter's face showed satisfaction.

"They would be. I shall never go back. And what of the illustrious drama that is going on in my absence? Judging from this morning's announcement things ought to be advanced."

"You're not at all nice about that, Leland," said Lady Flora sharply, "and I've nothing to tell you."

Pargeter laughed. "If you had, my dear girl, you would no doubt have put it into one of your extraordinarily indiscreet letters," he said. "It's awfully kind of you, Flora, but I'm afraid you mustn't write quite so often."

"I won't write at all, if you'd rather."

"Ah, that I couldn't bear. But don't use monogrammed envelopes—or violet ink——"

"Anything else?"

"Yes—*scent*. Personally I adore the delicate intimation that comes out of a packet with you in it; but both the postmen that serve us here have Tory noses—What an infernal row your motor is making out there! What's the matter with it?"

Flora got up, pulled her veil into its place, and drew her furs about her shoulders.

"I don't know what is the matter with it," she said. "Something went wrong on the way. I'll go and see to it; but I hope it will w-work well enough to take me to the nearest hotel."

There was a quiver in her voice, and she dashed at the door. Pargeter reached it just before her.

"My dear girl, what do you mean? You can't

see to it—there will be twenty people round the confounded thing by now. And you're not to go away! You've just come! Good God, Flora—control yourself!”

But Flora was flinging herself upon the door handle in a pitiful storm of tears.

“Let me go!” she sobbed. “I want to go—I wish I hadn't come! I thought I was helping you——”

Pargeter caught her by the wrist. “My dear child, I implore you——”

“And now you are angry with me——”

Sobs choked her words; she swayed and struggled with his hands. He threw his arms about her and gently forced her head down upon his shoulders. She resisted for a moment, then let him take off her hat and mop at her face with his handkerchief. She was at the mercy of her nerves; her body shook with weeping. He tried in vain to soothe her with words; only when his lips touched her shut eyes did he begin to control her. He kissed her cheeks and lips and she yielded her face to him; he held her closer with a quicker beat in his own blood.

“Poor little girl!” he whispered; and then: “How fragrant your hair is, Flora!” And at last her eyes sought his, and drew his lips to them again. In her heart she had often wished it; but Pargeter had never kissed her before. He had laughed with her, chaffed with her, sailed very near the wind with her; but till now he had respected their camaraderie, or had thought her

too frail, perhaps too perishable a thing for kissing. Now that he had her in his arms he wondered why he had been so long about it. As he stood soothing her and yielding to her, wheels stopped at the gate, and the bell rang sharply. Flora fled back to the fire, and Pargeter put his head into the hall.

"The drawing-room, Mrs. Nutt," he said, "if it's anybody I must see."

He listened to the opening of the door, and turned a face of relief to Lady Flora, who was reassuming her hat, at its most becoming perch, before the bit of glass on the wall.

"Of all the absolutely right people—Pamela!" he exclaimed; and in another moment his daughter, who was never, happily, too much surprised by anything, was explaining how charmed she was at finding their guest in Worsham.

"Take Lady Flora to your room, Pamela. She is a little over-tired by the run from town. And—you are very late—tell Mrs. Nutt to bring lunch at once."

CHAPTER XX

PAMELA knew Lady Flora Bellamy for exactly what she was. It is the tricky side of the gift of imagination, that a young lady of irreproachable conduct, surroundings, and experience should have this perceiving knowledge of another and a very different nature. As a type, she was not of much interest to the artist in Pamela, whose feeling was for distinctly finer shades than poor Flora presented ; but that did not make her values any the less clear to this young lady, whose grey eyes saw so much more in life and in people than was altogether natural. And one may suppose that eyes less observant than Pamela's would have been inclined to open at Lady Flora's presence, with tears hardly dry upon her lids, in Leland Pargeter's house that Sunday morning. Lady Flora herself was quick to know that, and to meet it.

" You, too, must have heard the news," she said, as she made such toilet as was permitted by the resources of the room Pamela now and then occupied at her father's. Pamela's face was certainly that of one who had heard it. " My dearest girl, isn't it too deplorable ! I simply *had* to bring it to your father—I couldn't bear the

thought that he might be in blissful ignorance and all the world cackling ! But in the end it was too much for me—I simply broke down and *howled* when I showed it to him. Don't politics get on your nerves ? They do on mine horribly ! ”

“ I am so sorry ! ” said Pamela. “ There ought to be some eau de Cologne here somewhere—here it is ! There's nothing better, even for politics, is there ? ”

“ You dear clever girl—you *are* so like him, you know ! And you mustn't be jealous—I just adore the genius you're lucky enough to have for a father. He takes very little notice of *me*; but I just adore him ! ”

“ Well,” said Pamela, with rather a dry little smile, “ shall we go down and give the genius his lunch ? I gather that he wants it.”

Mr. Drake had not returned, with Bennett or without him. Mrs. Nutt was given not another minute. Pamela had made Drake unnecessary and Bennett only desirable. It was a relief to Pargeter to sit down without them. His mood had changed, ambiguously, considering the arrival of the *Constitution* ; he was more himself than Pamela had seen him for a long time—almost, she thought, in his old reckless spirits again. Was it the flick of Madre's open challenge ? Surely it would be like him to take that cynically and darkly, not with this conquering air and this radiant good-humour. She watched and wondered as he played host to them, and begged Mrs. Nutt to let him make

his particular salad, and drew from the flowers on the table a rose to put in his buttonhole. Pamela was puzzled.

Of the little party Leland, indeed, was the only one quite unabashed and at ease. Lady Flora looked at him with tender, triumphant eyes, but found little to say ; and Pamela could produce nothing of all she was longing to bring forth. It was not possible even to mention Madre to her father before Lady Flora. Any third person would have made the reference difficult, but Flora turned it into a scandal. She sat consumed with the astonishing coincidences of the day, and with her longing for explanation, while Leland talked as if he enjoyed the occasion, and the *Constitution* lay on the floor like an exploded weapon. It was impossible to do anything but ignore it.

It was equally impossible to keep away, very long, from Pargeter's campaign, though he himself showed very little desire to talk about it. Flora demanded information.

"Do you find them as intelligent as you expected—the people?" she asked.

"In some directions a great deal more so."

"It must be fascinating to unfold all their beautiful future to them when they really follow you!"

"It's some time," laughed Pargeter, "since I've said much about their beautiful future. The people, as a matter of fact, don't care much more about it than we do. They asked to be informed about what's going to happen the day

after to-morrow. They want a new heaven and a new earth—so do we all. But they want it *now*. Anyhow, they would be obliged for something on account.”

“How fearfully difficult for you!”

“Oh, they’ll get something on account!” replied Pargeter easily. “They’re getting it all the time. What one wants to rub in is that they ought to make the most of it. But that isn’t popular.”

“Don’t you love being a people’s candidate?”

Pamela, who knew her father’s face, saw a look hover over it, with which she was very familiar, but which she had not seen for months. For months Leland had looked absorbed, elated, depressed, anxious or harried, but for months he had not looked bored. He looked now, for an instant, bored.

“I’m afraid I don’t love being anybody’s candidate, Lady Flora. It’s not an undertaking for a self-respecting dog. But, granting the extraordinary folly of standing at all, the Collectivist cause is, for some of us at least, the only one to stand for.”

The words had a jaded, perfunctory sound, Leland threw back his shoulders as if to counteract that effect of them. Pamela knew the squaring of the shoulders, too. It was her father’s way of asserting that he meant every word that he said.

“I love the people,” she said; “they’re so humorous, and so patient, and so decent. They’re an awfully good sort—the people!”

I hate worrying them, and—and bamboozling them.”

“You shouldn’t do it, Pam,” said her father sharply. “There’s no earthly need for you to canvass. Things are quite well enough. The whole Society for the Restoration of Oriental Crowns came in yesterday. I had to say I’d restore ’em, and so I will—when the opportunity arises. It is the first business of a politician to be elected. I say that now every evening instead of my prayers. But don’t canvass, Pam; I’d rather you didn’t—and I don’t believe it’s your strong point either.”

“I’m quite sure it isn’t,” replied Pamela, “but——” She crumbled the bit of bread beside her plate and did not finish her sentence.

“Do you know,” put in Lady Flora happily, “I’ve always had an idea that I could canvass! I’m *most* successful with my maids. Why not let me come and help?”

“It’s too good of you——” began Pamela; but Leland cut her short.

“Out of the question, dear lady,” he said. “You would knock up in a day. I’ve sacrificed Pamela—the smoke of her is ever before me—but there’s a limit. You were predestined, Pam, to carve this bird.”

Pamela accepted the duty, and as she performed it Pargeter went on talking.

“I love the people, too,” he said, with an interested eye on Pamela’s carving, “but I suppose the Lord knows why he made so many of them.”

"You want a good many," his daughter told him cheerfully, "for a three-cornered contest."

"Thank Heaven it is three-cornered!" said Pargeter. "It reduces the beastly business."

"Oh, no, daddy!" said Pamela. "You would romp in if it weren't for Bersteiner."

"Oh, how I should love to see him romp in!" cried Lady Flora. "I believe you think I *couldn't* canvass! I'm so tired," she sighed, with hands clasped and both elbows on the table, "of being thought just a butterfly! I'd rather be a grub."

"A grub would like my salad," Pargeter told her, helping her to it. "Pamela, I have found my vocation, if High Pollard rejects my advances. Market-gardening; I've chosen the spot. Just outside Sedgely station, for the early trains. Will you come and pack brussels sprouts for me in the season? Talking of trains, I've gone back to travelling first-class."

"Mistake, papa," said Pamela.

"No; I made a point of going third and cultivating my fellow-oaf as you suggested, until my fellow-oaf took to cultivating me! No use getting behind a newspaper! 'Is your name Pargeter?' 'That's my name, my good friend.' 'Labour candidate for High Pollard?' 'I am proud to say that that is so.' 'Then what's your answer to this?' It got to be intolerable. I have now taken refuge with my superiors."

"Your 'superiors'!" breathed Lady Flora

scornfully ; but Pamela, sending her parent the portion of the pheasant which she knew he best liked, only smiled.

" Pam doesn't agree with you, Lady Flora. She thinks I've sunk in the social scale ! " he declared, and went on before Pamela could defend herself. " Upon my word, it's sometimes difficult to feel that one hasn't, in view of what one's obliged to say Amen to. The people themselves are perfectly unobjectionable. Take them frankly, candidly, at their own honest point of social evolution—of course it's necessary to make every sort of allowance—and there's a lot to be said for the people. What I mean is, they're not canaille. But the men they admire ! One's fellow-champions ! "

" I suppose they aren't quite——" murmured Lady Flora. " For a gentleman it must be too embarrassing."

" Embarrassing does not express it. To be obliged to lend one's implied sanction to the methods of these demagogues is the real penalty of being in any way identified with a popular cause. I had Blackburny down here supporting me last week. I sat on the platform and turned hot and cold, while the audience roared applause at him."

" I wish for your sake Blackburny would come again," said Pamela. " Mr. Drake found that meeting very useful."

" Oh, I've no objection—I don't care how often he comes ! On the whole, he offends me less than Scance. Scance is such an emotional

brute. The meeting he addresses isn't political ; it's religious—Salvation Army ! ”

“ Does he go about with a drum ? ” asked Lady Flora breathlessly.

“ Oh, I don't mean literally. But here are Bennett and Drake,” as two black bowler hats passed the window. “ Bring them in here, Mrs. Nutt. They may want some lunch.”

But Bennett and Drake, it appeared, had satisfied the inner man. Bennett declared, jocularly, that they had both lost their appetites quite lately. He turned a shrewd look on Lady Flora, who was very gracious to him, and sat with his hands on his knees, rather ostentatiously waiting for Pargeter to be free to come to business. Lady Flora remembered with horror a dinner engagement in town.

“ I must fly ! ” she said.

“ I should be more than grateful to you,” said Leland, “ if you would drop Pamela on your way. You came through High Pollard, didn't you ? ”

“ I have got a thing to go back in, papa.”

“ You've also got a slight cold. And if Lady Flora doesn't mind—it will be so much quicker.”

Lady Flora would be only too delighted. She left them to get ready, and Pamela followed her. At the door she turned desperately.

“ May I have a word with you, papa ? ” she said ; and Leland came out into the hall.

At last she had her opportunity, but it found her dashed and uncertain.

“ Do you know what Drake has been doing ? ”

she demanded, as hotly as she could, almost consciously beating up her indignation. "Do you know that to-day—to-day of all days—the whole constituency is papered with your portrait and Madre's in an idiotic locket, and the electors asked in letters a foot long to vote for you as her husband! And have you see this?"

She thrust at him the leaflet she had been twisting and crumpling unseen all through luncheon. Leland looked at it, and read aloud, "What Mrs. Pargeter Believes."

Pamela watched him, expecting a gust of anger. But none came. He appeared instead very deliberately to consider the matter. His eye fell again on the leaflet.

"I find myself perfectly indifferent," he said, "as to what Mrs. Pargeter believes. As to the posters, if Drake had consulted me I should not, of course, have consented. As he didn't, I don't consider myself in any way involved. And I can't deny that we need something in the nature of a counterblast to this infernal thing in the *Constitution*

His daughter looked at him, tongue-tied. If that was his view——"

"My dearest girl, are you ready?" trilled Flora on the stairs. "Do let us fly! I shall be summonsed to-morrow all over the place—I promise you that!"

Leland packed them with ceremony into the motor, and stood, bare-headed, watching it start with his visitor and his daughter, along a road already dotted with his prospective constituents

and their perambulators. The wind blew the hairs on the bald patch on the top of his head about as he stood. Pamela, seeing it, had another pang for his dignity. Bennett, on the doorstep, also watched them away.

“Fine woman, that!” he remarked, as Par-
geter came up the steps.

CHAPTER XXI

“**I** DID loathe the drive from town this morning!” Lady Flora confided to Pamela. “I was so frightened and anxious; and it is so hateful to be the bringer of bad news. But I shall love the journey back. I feel quite reassured. He is very confident, isn’t he?”

“I hope not.”

“But he is *certain* to win. Didn’t you notice what he said about the Society of Oriental Potentates? No, it couldn’t have been that!—but some Society coming over in a body. He is sweeping all before him!”

“There are just thirteen of them,” responded Pamela; “and nine are women.”

“What a *pity* we haven’t women’s suffrage! I do feel awfully keen about that, don’t you? When I think that Emily’s young man has got a vote and I haven’t I feel furious—furious! He’s the very worst type of Individualist with a Conservative basis—doing very well as journeyman plumber, and wants Emily to go with him to Alberta, where he’ll do even better—my precious Emily! But neither of them think for an instant of *me*. I’ve spoken very seriously to Emily about the State’s being responsible for taking care of her babies if ever she has any; but the idiot says she’d rather

do it herself. I had them both in the other evening and lectured them soundly, I assure you, especially on the nationalisation of the means of production and distribution. But the intelligence of such people only goes *so far*, you know. He asked the most ridiculous questions. A little knowledge is *such* a dangerous thing."

Pamela looked out of the window.

"Christine is much more amenable. She takes my view entirely. She's a regular little anarchist, is Christine. *So* refreshing. *My dear!* Do you mean to say that horror is intended to represent your stepmother!"

They were passing a blank wall blazing with election posters. "Slower, George," said Lady Flora into the tube, and as the motor slackened she leaned out eagerly.

"'Vote for the Husband of the Noblest Woman in England,' " she read. "Oh, I hope they will! But how quaint the poor dear looks with her hair all piled on the top of her head. She doesn't do it like that now, does she! And dark blue eyes. Her eyes are brown. Positively the only thing I recognise is the Order of Merit. And is that the pendant the Shah sent her?"

"No," said Pamela, "it isn't. She wears her Orders sometimes, but never the jewels foreign potentates used occasionally to present to her. I believe she wishes she were a Viceroy so that she could refuse them. As it is, they are locked up somewhere out of sight."

"Sometimes," breathed Lady Flora, as the

motor raced on again, "I think she isn't quite human, dear Mrs. Pargeter. And then again I think she is. Oh, yes, I am sure she is!"

The tone was provocative, and so was Lady Flora's brooding reminiscent smile. Pamela, longing to ignore them, could not quite let the tone and smile pass.

"And which do you find her in this morning's *Constitution*?" she asked. "Most human or most inhuman?"

"You dear, clever thing—what difficult questions you ask! I can't help telling you again how like him you are. Oh, how can one possibly say! It is human, isn't it, to want to make a great big splash like that? And yet—I quite see your point of view—it is *rather* the other thing to do it just now. Of course it is. She might so easily have waited until after the election. I'm afraid my sympathy is quite with your father, really. Well, haven't I dashed all the way from town to tell him so!"

"You have, indeed," said Pamela, with modulated gratitude.

"Yes, dear Mrs. Pargeter truly *ought* to have left it until after the election. But I suppose there were other interests to consider—and other people."

"You mean her new political friends," said Pamela indifferently.

"I mean—now please don't let me be indiscreet—yes, that's what I mean, of course."

Lady Flora was on no footing of intimacy with Pamela. They lived in different worlds and

seldom met. Besides, Pamela had kept her secret. No one had the key to that well-curtained door behind the quiet grey eyes that looked so intelligently at life. Acourt himself had no certain knowledge that his touch would open it. There was Madre, of course, with the silent divinations born of her own passion ; but Madre's silent divinations dropped into a well of silence. Gertrude Ambrose even, who once patronised Pamela at a literary dinner, was without information. She never climbed, or ascended, to the turret chamber in Kensington ; it was much too far out. But even if she had so climbed, the grey eyes would have defeated her. She had no way of getting behind them. So it was not in the least maliciously that Lady Flora begged Pamela to guard her from indiscretion. It was her source of life, indiscretion, the indulgence she loved the most ; and now, as she drove home after an exciting morning, it seethed and bubbled in all her veins.

" You could hardly be indiscreet to me about Madre," said Pamela. " You see, I know her so well. But I am always interested in the impression she leaves with other people. Don't make mistakes about her though. She would be the last person to care about splashes. She is much too big for that way of being human."

Lady Flora reflected.

" Perhaps she is. But there are others," she said.

" Plenty," smiled Pamela. In spite of her, her voice invited.

“And one loves her the better for them!” Flora declared. “You could not, could you, care much about a perfectly flawless person? You would want to put her in a museum.”

“And what, in your opinion, is the endearing crack in my stepmother?” asked Pamela, hating herself as she did it. Why could she not snuff out this unhealthy little incandescence of interest in her father’s wife?

“‘Endearing crack’—how delicious!” flattered Flora. “But imagine your asking poor little me—you who write books and see through everybody! Tell me,” she went on ingratiatingly, “*why* don’t you put her in? It would be a *succès fou*.”

Again Pamela saw her duty to put out the unhealthy little light; but what she said was: “Wouldn’t she be rather too—commanding?”

“A sort of lady whale among all the lady minnows!” cried Flora, and buried her nose in her big muff, contemplating space and the possibilities of fiction over the top of it.

“Perhaps she would. But you could find men big enough, couldn’t you, to match? Captain Acourt, for instance. That man of mystery. He would do, wouldn’t he?”

“I have never thought him either very big or very mysterious,” said Pamela, with rather a difficult smile. “He has ability, no doubt, but why Captain Acourt?”

“Oh, I don’t know! One thinks of them together, doesn’t one? They’re the greatest friends.”

“Does one? I think you must write the story, Lady Flora.”

Was it now Pamela who flattered, Pamela Pargeter who ingratiated? There was the testimony of her own ears, and there was Lady Flora taking the bait with a simplicity that made her ashamed.

“I—oh, don’t I wish I could! If I could only, only *express* myself—that’s my difficulty. I’m always seeing things and having ideas, but just that one little power of expression—that’s what I haven’t got. Wasn’t it horrid of my fairy godmother! If she had been just the tiniest bit kinder, wouldn’t I have loved to write the romance of those two!”

“Is there then so much as that—a romance?”

“But, my dear, *d’où tombez-vous!* Do you mean to tell me you don’t know all about it? Then please, please don’t let me say another word.”

“I knew they were friends, of course,” said Pamela slowly. “But as you know, I haven’t been living in Arlington Street for a long time; and lately I have broken off all relations with my stepmother. I shall never resume them now. I have the greatest admiration and respect for her——”

“Oh, so have I!” ejaculated Lady Flora.

“But it had to be like that. Circumstances have driven us apart. And for nearly two months now I haven’t stirred outside High Pollard. So I know nothing.”

“If I were sure I wasn’t doing harm,” doubted

Lady Flora. "Well, you mustn't *let* me do harm, that's all! And why should not you know at least as much as all the world does? It's rather difficult to explain; but he's said to have all the authority, if you understand what I mean, of a husband already, and they're supposed to be only waiting——"

Pamela sat still and cold, longing for the power to say, "Stop. Tell me no more." Instead of that she said: "Only waiting——"

"Oh, this part I *know* I ought not to have told you! I believe she is pledged not to do anything that would injure Mr. Pargeter's chances of getting into the House. But if he fails—can't you guess? He's such a dear, and he's been so unhappy all these years—you know that—and of course, he has let horrid women impose on him, and—oh, well, I *hope* there's nothing in it. Now shrive me for having told you."

"I was bound to hear it somehow—somewhere," said Pamela. "Why not from you?"

"I really think you were. And nobody could have told you more fairly. But isn't *my* position difficult between them? Both, in their different ways, so much to me. Is that your house? First to the right, George. Isn't my position *cruel*?"

Lady Flora laid her hand on the door of the motor while she finished what she had to say.

"I sometimes feel too miserably torn between them. I do at this very minute. Please guess, I didn't mean to tell you, but please guess—where I am dining to-night?"

“ I can’t,” said Pamela, “ but I am afraid you will be late.”

“ No, I won’t. Christine never asks more than ten minutes in an emergency. *With Mrs. Pargeter !* Isn’t it too extraordinary an end to my day ! I shall just do it. Good-bye ! It was sweet of you to come with me. Fly, George ! ”

CHAPTER XXII

IT was agreed that the State Labour Party was entitled to find a grievance in Mr. St. John Bersteiner's contest, in the Liberal interest, of the constituency of High Pollard. The position had early been made plain to the local Liberal Committee, who could neither deny the increase in the votes controlled by the trade unions since the last election, or the chances of success that attended the candidature of Leland Pargeter. Head-quarters had been favourable to a bargain, the Labour people had abandoned the intention of breaking fresh ground in one of the London divisions; it was claimed that a bargain had been made. Then, after a non-committal silence of nearly a month of Pargeter's campaign, the High Pollard Liberals had suddenly produced their man, a moneyed, honeyed stranger known only as an accommodating City creditor by a few of the town's drapers. Remonstrance had been fruitless; Bersteiner was launched before the town was completely acquainted with the shape of his nose; and the protests of Mr. Clarence Gommie and others were curtly met by the statement that chances had been duly calculated and looked in spite of everything too good for Tyrrell.

Bersteiner had gone to work with fluency and energy, resource and inventiveness. Within a week both the other candidates had new unattached canvassers who went about saying the most damaging things with the most ingenuous enthusiasm. "Vote for Tyrrell," they exhorted from their wheelbarrows, "and get rid of the iniquity of Old Age Pensions"; or "Vote for Pargeter, and abolish the right to own anything." Bersteiner was genial, he was round; what he himself had to say carried a certain fat emphasis. He was easy, he was shrewd; he could take a joke and make one. In a fortnight it seemed to the good people of High Pollard that they had known him all their lives. He was fast drawing back to their old habits of thinking the town's many Liberal deserters to Socialism. He had an effective, broadly smiling way with theories, and an appeal to common sense that flattered every man who heard it. He made a better fight against Bennett and his men than Sir Hugh Tyrrell did; but even the Conservatives, who lost to him daily, had for some time been less certain of their satisfaction at his appearance.

This was the state of things just one week before High Pollard, that very "mixed" constituency, would poll. On that first day of the seven that were left, Bennett, sitting astride a wooden chair in the Worsham Committee-room, gloomily scanning the last batch of workers' cards sent in, received a telegram, rather a long telegram. He read the message, pushed his felt hat to the back of his head, straightened out the

slip with both hands, and read it again. Then he wiped his forehead, swore a little under his breath but very joyously, and took an impulsive step to the window to look for Drake, who had gone out for a moment. Drake was not in sight, but one of the cabs from the livery opposite was driving up empty. Bennett threw up the window, hailed the cab, went down the stairs as rapidly as a heavy man can, and got into it.

"The *Herald* office," he told the driver, and sat well into the corner, for Bennett in a cab would be an unusual sight in Worsham. Then he opened the telegram again, which was mainly concerned with the facts reported under "The Police Courts" in that morning's *Times*, and was signed "Gommie." It was as astonishing a piece of information as could imaginably be tossed into the midst of a political conflict; and Bennett's mind was busy, as he drove, to account for the mere possibility of it.

"Queer, the risks some men will run," he said to himself. "I suppose he had some reason for thinking the game safe, or he never would have had the nerve to stand." Bennett also, as he neared the *Herald* office, extolled Gommie for his sagacity in telegraphing the extract in full, instead of rushing wildly at the telephone to communicate it.

"Simpson would have been bound to jib at telephone news," he reflected.

Simpson was the editor of the *Herald*, which was not, like the *Times*, a daily paper, but appeared every Thursday. This was early Wednes-

day morning ; there would be just time for the work of reproduction. The *Herald* was a Tyrrell organ. Bennett rapidly calculated its attitude towards the intelligence he brought.

"Any way you look at it, they're a newspaper first," he said to himself, as he walked solidly up the steps, having told his conveyance to wait.

Twenty minutes later he came out again, a little ruffled, but in the main satisfied. The *Herald* was a newspaper first, nor did it wish to cast the least doubt upon the veracity of either Mr. Bennett or Mr. Gommie ; but it preferred to await the arrival of the *Times*, which was due, by a perversity of the train service, not earlier than half-past ten. However, the *Herald* would keep its columns open, and the editor was, of course, obliged to Mr. Bennett for putting him, as he said, "on to it."

"Although," said Simpson, "we're bound to recognise that this will work out considerably more to your advantage than to ours."

"Stinker," reflected his informant, as he drove to a job printing-press, not the *Herald's*, to get out a thousand handbills, and went on to Pargeter's house behind the evergreens, where he found his candidate sitting down to breakfast.

Bennett handed him the telegram. "Things begin to look our way," he said.

"Excellent !" replied Pargeter amiably, without opening it, and knocked the top off his egg. "Have a cup of coffee, Bennett ?"

"I can't—it makes me bilious. Read that—it's worth a cold breakfast."

"Infernal weather we're having," said Leland, picking up the envelope. "Are you quite sure you have closed both windows, Mrs. Nutt? Sit down, Bennett. Take a chair by the fire. Now then—Gommie the worthy. Cla——Bless my soul! Bersteiner in the Police Court! Hard luck, very hard luck for our friend. Poor old Bersteiner—I was beginning quite to hope he'd get in. Now, I suppose, he probably won't. I wish you'd have some coffee, Bennett."

"I'll be sorry for him this time next week," said Bennett grimly. "And not before."

Pargeter put up his eyeglasses and reconsidered the message; then he threw himself back in his chair, crossed his legs and laughed.

"I feel rather like that myself," said Bennett, "but I haven't had time to enjoy it yet. That wipes out Sinjin, and his friends can do nothing more at this time of day. They're fairly in the soup."

"Conspiracy to defraud," chuckled Pargeter. "I laughed to think, Bennett, what a charming lot we are that offer ourselves to this favoured constituency. Bersteiner, who gets twenty thousand— isn't it?—on the security of false wharf warrants—how, in heaven's name, could he do that? Tyrrell fresh from divorcing his wife. I—well, I with the vine leaves unwithered in my hair——"

Bennett looked at him with impatience and barely concealed dislike.

"I don't know about the vine leaves in your hair," he said. "Better not let 'em show too much. There isn't such a lot of feeling about Sir Hugh's divorce. She was a bad lot, and he's brushed most of the mud off by now. But Bersteiner's a damned good riddance. Nothing can be assumed, of course; but a charge like that is good enough. He can't so much as show his face with a thing of that sort hanging over him. He'll simply drop out. And I've taken good care the electors will know the reason why. There'll be a strong reaction."

"Well, I imagine we wanted it," said Pargeter. "Mrs. Nutt, I shall not be proud to represent this bacon in the House of Commons. I shall not indeed."

He rose as Bennett got up saying, "There's plenty to do," and, with an effort in which his table-napkin seemed to play a part, looked serious and impressed.

"Well—er—are you sure they won't put anybody else up? There's always Porter."

Bennett turned a shaggy glance on him.

"Considering that to-morrow's nomination day—I hope you've made a note of that"—he added satirically, "they'd have their work cut out for them."

"Then exactly what—explain to me, Bennett—exactly what is the present position of the Liberal party in North Brents."

"Just were they were before they played the Bersteiner trick on us, less what they've spent; and they've spent a lot."

“ Poor fellows ! ” said Pargeter, accompany-
his champion to the door. “ Poor fellows !
And thanks, Bennett, for reminding me about
to-morrow.”

“ Ass ! ” said Bennett with feeling on the
steps, when he had closed the door behind
him. “ Ass ! ”

CHAPTER XXIII

EVENTS proved Mr. Bennett exact in his prediction. The evening papers at once announced Bersteiner released on bail; but he did not take advantage of that to make any personal explanation to High Pollard. The result, however, of his communications with his Executive Committee was the announcement that the nomination would not be made before the proceedings suddenly taken against the candidate, had even reached the ears of many of High Pollard's rural voters. His committee-rooms were closed; his agent went about picking up loose ends of liability. The local party leaders agreed that it would after all have been better to run Porter, who had got in once and failed three times; they had had experience of Porter. Humble workers explained to the cottagers that Bersteiner was in "trouble;" and it was agreed that nobody ever knew how inconveniently trouble might come. A certain amount of regret was expressed that there was to be no opportunity of voting for him nevertheless; many voters having kind hearts. And there was a great burst of what the *Herald* called "renewed activity" in both of the other camps. Drake, by a master-stroke, promptly covered every inch of the

Liberal posters with his own. Bersteiner was obliterated in a night; and Leland Pargeter sprang out on all the hoardings as his natural successor.

It was on the next afternoon that Pamela, coming out of a friendly shoeshop in the High Street with fresh badges from the industrious fingers of Miss Angela Boys, saw Percy Acourt emerge upon the pavement at a distance of a dozen paces from her. He was leaving Sir Hugh Tyrrell's head-quarters; and in the instant before his glance fell upon her, Pamela could see that his eye ranged about him with an eager travelling look of search. In that instant her heart fluttered with the knowledge that he looked for her, for just that chance encounter. In the next, recognition shot across the space that divided them, and with it descended upon both of them the impulse to avoid a meeting. Pamela, her feet like stone, turned toward the nearest door, which disconcerted her with the reek and blue posters of a public-house. Acourt, too, looked with rigid face and shoulders toward the other end of the street. Then Pamela felt herself approached, heard herself addressed, yielded her hand to be shaken by Captain Acourt as by a friendly acquaintance. They took at once the natural emphatic note of being happy to meet; the common convention—it made the surface of everything simple and possible for the moment.

“Which way are you going?” he asked. “May I join you? I have an hour before my train.”

"I am going home," said Pamela. She had not been, quite so soon, but she was numb with the tumult at her heart, and hardly knew what reply to make. Only one thing was sure, she could not, could not dismiss him, nor could she talk with him there in the staring street. She wanted time to collect herself, and shelter; she felt for an instant the familiar, ugly need of strategical advantages. Then it melted and vanished, he seemed himself to be so without strategy.

"Then—may I come?" he asked humbly, and she tried to put a lightness into her "But of course."

He stepped into place at her side, and held out his hand for the parcel she carried, but she shook her head.

"No," she said. "It's campaign literature. I can't let you."

At that he smiled, rather ruefully, but he could not have told her more plainly that he forgave, acquiesced, understood; and she let him insist upon taking the bundle from her hand.

"For tuppence I would distribute it," he said.

They walked soberly on, exchanging trivial sentences; but their spirits drove along before them, questioning, entreating, accusing, faster than the world moves.

"You have had a convulsion here," he said, pointing to a stray placard that still invited votes for Bersteiner with a clout of mud in the middle of it.

"Yes. It was an extraordinary surprise.

Why the party were not better informed one can't guess."

"I hear the fraud was mainly engineered by Bersteiner's partner, who corrupted a wharf official. But there seems to be little doubt that he was accessory. Anyway, it finishes him. His withdrawal should make all the difference to your father."

"We hope so. The Liberals are naturally sulky, and there will be a great many abstentions. Still, we hope so."

"It comes, of course, a little late. There would have been a better chance of rallying them a fortnight ago even, and they would have been still too demoralised to put up a substitute. But, even as it is, nothing more useful could have happened."

His tone was sympathetic, cordial. Pamela felt icy defences melting in her. She cast about hurriedly for something to steady her.

"You have come down to speak at Sir Hugh's mass meeting to-night?"

Acourt glanced at her. Had he not just told her he was returning to town in an hour?

"No. Tyrrell is an old friend, and has asked me more than once, but——"

"You have refused," she dashed in, with her old longing folly.

"I have refused."

"That was nice of you," she said shyly; and for once he let her take all the sweetness there was in knowing that it was because of the complication of her, and of Leland, that he had refused.

"I have come down to see him, and reassure him as to my personal attitude, which was, of course, easy to do," said Acourt; and a little imp in the heart of Pamela lifted its head and laughed at the word "reassure," while a bigger thing than all the little imps throbbed silently and said, "No, that was a pretext. You came because you could no longer stay away. And I am glad—glad—glad you came."

They went on together in silence. The street drifted past them; many steps they took without speaking. High Pollard voters, in the doors of their shops, looked interestedly at the pair, but without surprise. Acourt was a stranger, his politics unknown to them.

"How will *they* go?" he asked, as they passed a group at the door of the local ironmonger's.

Pamela smiled. "I should say against us, but I don't believe they know themselves," she said. "They're Tory at heart, and the Tyrrells have lived here for ever. Hareham Park is——"

"Yes, I know," he interrupted. "Your father has taken a very dignified line," he added; and the words appealed to her sharp sensitiveness as if he had gently touched her.

"He wanted to—poor papa. But he has not been allowed." She looked about her. "*That*," she nodded at a locket poster, "was done in a night—without his knowing. His people are intolerably assuming. They take advantage of his lack of knowledge of the practical side of a campaign. He is constantly embarrassed by them."

Acourt looked at the portraits, lifted his eyebrows, and for a moment did not reply. He seemed to consider the matter on her behalf, and to put it aside.

"He can't do better than leave himself in his chairman's hands," he said presently. "Bennett is a rough fellow, but very influential, I gather. I read your father's election address. It was an extremely interesting analysis of his position."

"Yes," said Pamela. "I'm afraid that's what it was," and their eyes met in a frank smile of understanding of Leland Pargeter.

The shops were left behind; they dropped into a slower pace. The common looked kind, dull green, with snow in patches. The canal slipped on about its business, the Tyrrells on the other side pricked up unheeding. After the narrow street it was almost a privacy; they took breath in it, and gathered themselves to meet the emergency of each other.

"Do you like canvassing?" asked Acourt. His words, to himself at least, carried very little significance. Their mutual silence was the important thing, and their moving, in steps that fell together, to some point that he hoped was distant.

"How can I like it?" she said. It was a concession to his private knowledge of her, a generosity, and he took it generously, in silence.

"I hate it," she told him. "Even if I were—whole-hearted, I should hate it. Do you see that first cottage beyond the saw-mill, the one with the lean-to behind? The lean-to is the

kitchen, and just at twelve yesterday I was tactfully knocking at the kitchen door. I had tried the front door in vain; but you know we are never discouraged. And it's such a good time, noon, the wives getting the men's dinners, and the men at home eating them. The woman opened the door—she was a sloven, poor thing, and there were five dirty touzled children crowding to see the visitor, the littlest hanging on to her skirts, and something on the fire that was boiling over, and on a chair looking charming, Lady Mary Goode, begging for a blue vote for Sir Hugh. 'Very well, Mrs. Banks, I know we may count on you,' she said, as I squeezed against the door to let her pass. And as she went a collector from a burial society came for a subscription, and the next to the littlest pinched its finger in the door and screamed—and screamed. And in the midst of it all the poor staring, stupid eyes of the woman, anxious not to be uncivil. I left her telling the collector that when she had paid the rent he would get his money; but she made no pledges to me—I couldn't ask her."

"Still," said Acourt, "you go to those people with a gospel they can understand, or think they can. You have concrete, immediate benefits for them—you can dazzle them with the golden eggs——"

"Ah, don't," she begged. "Do you suppose I haven't taken all the cowardly comfort there was in that. Nothing can make it anything but an outrage. And the rebukes! I went to a

house last week hunting up a removal. An elderly woman came to the door with an anxious, frozen face, 'Is Mr. Hall in?' I asked. We are so polite with our Mist'ers. She looked at me as if there was just a chance I had a job for him. 'No, miss, he ain't in at present,' she said. 'Can you tell me when he will be?' 'Not exactly, miss,' she said. 'He's been out since very early this morning.' Then she noticed the badge under my fur. 'Is it about the election, miss?' 'Yes,' I said. 'We have every confidence that Mr. Hall will vote the working-man's colour; but never mind, I'll come back in the afternoon.'

"'Well, I guess you needn't,' she said. 'We've got death. And the funeral's in the afternoon.' And she shut the door. *We've got death.*"

Acourt looked at her and saw that her lip was trembling.

"I'm very sorry," he said gently. "Such experiences cannot, of course, be foreseen."

"Oh, be sorry for *them*! How long will they endure it? Must we have a revolution to teach us to respect the decencies of life?"

Acourt smiled gravely, reflecting that she had caught a touch of the democratic manner.

"Revolution is such a big word in England," he said. "Then your father is in good spirits?"

"Oh, as to papa's spirits—they vary," Pamela told him lightly; and he accepted the indication that she had no confidences to make about her father.

“I wish him all good fortune,” Acourt said, in his need to break down barriers. A little red came into Pamela’s cheeks, and her feet quickened beside him. They passed together through Mrs. James’s gate.

“I am very grand here,” said Pamela. “I have the whole of the first floor.”

They drew chairs to either side of the fireplace in the little parlour. She picked up the tongs and he took them from her, and mended the fire, and looked at her in simple, smiling content with what they had snatched from the day. They talked on; their sentences were like little boats that toss above the tide.

“Blackport is always faithful and true?” she asked after a while, as she might have asked six months before.

For an instant he did not answer.

“Oh, I believe so. But I have had warnings. There is mischief going on, you know, everywhere. England is honeycombed.”

“Still,” she said, startled, “you are, of course, confident?”

“Reasonably so,” he told her, but she saw a new line prick itself between his eyes.

The clock on the mantelpiece pointed a remorseless finger. Pamela glanced at it and said:

“You will miss your train.”

“No,” he replied, looking at his watch.

“Another five minutes.”

And for another five minutes they sat, silent and beautiful minutes, stirring with the freedom

of their passion, which seemed at last to tear itself from all bonds and stand confessed between them. The few words they exchanged were still about the election, commonplace enough, until, just before he went, Pamela struck a chord.

"I am glad of this experience for one thing," she said softly. "It has taught me to suspect selfishness even in some of our own ideals, and—that there is no work in the world that should tempt us before the lifting up of our own."

"No work in the world," he repeated, in deliberate concession; and it was as if they had clasped hands upon it, comrades again above the deeper thing. He could not help spoiling it a little by adding, as if to justify himself.

"Everybody admits that we have left the business of social reform far too much, far too much to the other side," but even that had a glamour for her, and made his agreement handsomer.

Then he picked up his hat, and said his usual brusque good-bye.

"I am afraid you will miss your train," she told him again, and his reply to that was, "Well, I suppose there are others." He did miss his train; but the hour he had to wait for the next did not seem to him ill-spent.

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS. PARGETER sat alone in her drawing-room, before the marble nymphs and cupids that came crowding to opulent firesides after the purer period. She sat there alone, eminently successful, praised, great. An evening paper on the floor had been telling her again, in fine, sincere language how great she was, irrespective of any party creed to which she might be momentarily attracted. The implication was that before the vast public benefits that dropped from her hand, the State should be no more concerned with her private whim in politics than with the fashion of her clothes or the dressing of her hair. There was no sting in it to Mary—she agreed. The world had no concern, as things oddly still were, with her political views. That did not prevent their being serious to herself. It was because they were so serious to herself, and because she felt compelled to take a line in defence of them, that she was sitting there keeping an appointment that promised to be a little dilatory on the other side.

In the meantime she reflected rather sadly upon how little such a position as hers, even such

an attitude as hers, did to make life simpler, easier, more attractive. She felt herself more than a mere benevolence. She had interests, ambitions. She wrote, three or four times a year, weighty articles upon social topics for the more authoritative magazines; she kept herself in touch with the crowding subjects of the day. It was her greatest happiness to believe her house a centre for the arts and the sciences, as well as for the directing intelligences in that world of affairs which was her own more intimate range. She begged the world, humbly enough, for the inflow of its spirit. Yet here she sat so poignantly alone.

People of temperament seemed to leave it on her doorstep, coming in to sit stiffly upon her expensive furniture bereft of all but their clothes. She made them very welcome; she bent to them with all her appreciation; she bade them sing, and they were dumb. That very afternoon she had planned an inspired little gathering; and the great painter entered, and the brilliant dramatic critic, and the soul of the Irish Renaissance, and that subtle psychologist who wrote in fiction, and presently the magic went out of the circle, and there sat about her fireside a group of more or less withered bodies declining or accepting more tea, sharing and shifting some weight among them, extinguished by the large, soft, kind blanket that seemed to cherish their spirits so close to their mouths. She herself did not see them as withered bodies, did not philosophise about them at all, felt only grateful to them

for having come, and a little puzzled by the ring that floated back in their voices as they addressed each other at the top of the staircase, on the other side of the drawing-room door, when they went. And now that they were gone Mary felt more than ever alone.

She thought she wanted the things of the spirit, but I think affection would have done as well—artless, illogical, exacting—a little child's. She, too, had so much of that to give to something that pulled at her skirts; and she had to distribute it through committees. She did not dare to look where love lurked in the shadows. Instead, she knew that at least one Cabinet had been united in respect for her. The flame in the grate leapt up.

“Mr. Norreys!” said the footman, and turned on twenty twinkling lights.

Norreys made his way to her, a happy thought in his face. There was always a happy thought in Norreys' face; you could not see him without it. Sometimes, nearly always, it came out by his lips; sometimes, as now, it retired again into his circulation.

“Dear Mrs. Pargeter, I fear you have indulged me in allowing this tiresome hour.”

“It was very good of you to respond at all to my sudden demand,” she told him. “I can imagine what next Sunday's *Constitution* must be taking out of you.”

“It is a great moment. Have we roused England? I hope it and doubt it. Ple-

thoric old England ! A nation ages, Mrs. Pargeter."

"Are we to be accused of senility on Sunday?"

"This Sunday ! Never in the world ! This Sunday you are to be generalled, belauded, trumpeted to the polls. The Sunday after—I do not say. We may all be in an express train by then, dashing on in charge of an intoxicated engine-driver. Dashing on—anywhere. If so, I shall wave a torch out of the window—which will light up a few frightened faces——But we must not think it. We intend to win. Our intention may carry us through. Stranger things have happened."

They sat down, and talked a little more about the country's situation, which opened out invitingly ; and then Mary saw the dawn of a look in Norreys' face, a look with which the human countenance had made her familiar, a look curious about the point. People never wandered, with Mary, willingly from the point. She brought herself to it at once.

"You know what is happening in High Pollard ? " she asked.

Norreys' face expressed the prompt subjection of his mind to the gravest of propositions. It was as if he had put compulsory service upon his ideas, forbidding them for the moment to range.

"I know generally," he said. "The Liberals deserve their *contretemps*—there was the clearest understanding. Though from our point of view it's unlucky. Mr. Pargeter's chances, of course,

are improved. But with these nondescript constituencies it is most unsafe—most unsafe to prophesy. They respond to no single heartbeat.”

He paused in pure discomfort. Nothing else perhaps would make Norreys pause. The Pargeter situation, however, choked him to think of, and to discuss it with one of the principals taxed even Norreys’ power of discussion.

“Then you think the chances between the two remaining candidates fairly even?”

“I do. Remember, I go only on the political history of the place, which seems, if you will pardon my saying so, to be among the most contemptible of the many contemptible records the realm has to show. No stability, no purpose, not a germ of political perception. The loudest shout, I should say, the last hand on the barrel organ——”

“Then,” Mary interrupted him firmly, “the thing that has taken place there becomes all the more important—may just make the difference.”

“Bersteiner’s collapse——”

“Not Bersteiner’s collapse. I have nothing to do with that. But the claim, suddenly made at the eleventh hour, to my influence and support——”

“How is that possible? Have you not given the High Pollard campaign the widest sort of berth, and have you not permitted your allegiance to be nailed to the very proud mast of

the Unionist party ? Unless—do you mean that Tyrrell has been making improper use of it ? ”

“ So far as I can learn Sir Hugh has behaved with extraordinary delicacy from first to last,” Mary told him, “ and I felt assured that my husband would not do less. But apparently other views have prevailed with him. At all events I understand that the constituency is now papered with my portrait, inviting votes for him.”

“ You amaze me.”

“ That is not all. I have received a leaflet, preaching his political doctrine in the words of an outworn opinion of mine—an address delivered years ago. And my absence from his platforms is being explained away with things like this.”

She handed him a newspaper cutting, and two others fluttered to the floor. He read :

“ We regret to learn that the participation of the Hon. Mrs. Leland Pargeter in the contest at High Pollard, in which she is naturally very keenly interested, has been impossible owing to a threatening of heart trouble, which naturally makes the excitements of a political campaign inadvisable.”

“ A pure invention ! ” exclaimed Norreys.

“ No. I don’t know how they knew, but it is half true. I have been cautioned, and I am obliged to be careful. My father died like that—as an old man, of course, but for years he lived under sentence. I *am* forbidden excite-

ments ; I have been obliged to relinquish much. But my husband, I am sure, was unaware of it ; and in any case it was far from being the reason——”

“ Of course not,” murmured Norreys, without looking at her.

“ I wonder,” he continued with unconscious association of ideas, “ that Acourt did not mention this. I saw him this morning, and he told me he had been at High Pollard yesterday. It was he, no doubt, who brought you news of it.”

Norreys looked up in surprise. Mrs. Pargeter’s answer was so long in coming. When it did come, what she said was irrelevant.

“ Will you touch the bell near you—there, close to the mantelpiece, by your elbow ? ”

He did so, and a maid came quickly into the room. Mrs. Pargeter nodded to her and she went as quickly out, returning with a wine-glass.

“ Thank you, Lizzie ! ” her mistress handed it back to her. “ Forgive me,” she went on to Norreys. “ I have to be so careful. It is quite tiresome. We were speaking of Captain Acourt. No, I heard of it otherwise, and I have not seen him about this. It is not quite fair, is it, to burden any one friend with the whole duty of advice ? But you, too, have been so kind—I thought I might send for you.”

“ I am honoured,” said Norreys.

“ I don’t know whether you will see, Mr.

Norreys, that I cannot allow this to happen and make no sign."

Norreys, with wider-open eyes, said something unintelligible, the only time since his babyhood he ever had.

"They have counted, you see, upon my making no sign. They saw how painful it would be—they thought I would not have the courage——"

Norreys nodded silently.

"I don't know now whether I am not a monster. But after all that has happened to me of intellectual conviction I cannot be the means of adding to an influence in public affairs in which I do not believe—to the methods of which I find myself growing more and more keenly opposed—can I?"

"Dear lady," said the stricken Norreys, "dear lady, I feel that any word I could utter would only add to your embarrassments. It is like attempting to advise in a predicament—in a predicament dictated by the devil."

Mary frowned, ever so slightly. She did not see her predicament dictated by the devil, distressing as it was to her. She saw it rather dictated by her own conscience. Nor had she summoned Norreys altogether, if at all, to ask his advice, but to carry out, unless there was some unsuspected difficulty, her decision.

"So I have written this," she said, and handed him a typewritten sheet. It was addressed: "To my Friends, the Electors of High Pollard," and signed "Mary Pargeter."

Norreys read it with an expression he might suitably have taken into a chamber of the dead. It would have been impossible to look more concerned, more deeply regretful than he did. Norreys was the most human, the most ingenuous soul that ever found its irresistible business in politics. Some moments passed while he read to the end ; and he glanced through it again, noting a point here and there, before he spoke.

“ Madam,” he then addressed her, “ this is very clear.”

“ I hope it is,” she replied equably. “ I have tried to make it so.”

“ It is, as well, if I may say so, very able—very forcible,” Norreys congratulated her, with a crestfallen and lugubrious face.

“ I am reassured if you think so. What I should be glad to know is whether there is any legal, or technical, or other objection with which I may not be acquainted, to putting it in the hands of the voters.”

“ There is no legal—or technical—objection certainly,” said Norreys.

“ And you think it would be effective—as a counterpoise to what has been done ? ”

“ I think it would probably be, though rather late, extremely effective,” said Norreys.

“ Unless ”—his eye dilated—“ you never can tell—unless it went against you by rousing the natural man in them to some form of insensate sympathy with the under dog.”

“ The under dog,” repeated Mary. “ But

surely it is not taken for granted, is it, that Sir Hugh is top dog ? ”

“ No,” said Norreys.

“ Then,” said Mary, “ I should be grateful if the letter could be printed as a circular at once, and—how can it best be distributed ? ”

“ By post, I think. It must reach our people there in bulk to-morrow, and they will get it out locally. I will telephone the agent at once to be prepared with help in addressing the envelopes.”

“ How many things there are to think of,” said Mary.

“ It might appear simultaneously in the London papers,” the party journalist suggested.

“ Is that necessary ? ”

“ No,” said Norreys with compunction. “ After all, there is no need to kill the dead. They will hear of it fast enough.”

Privately he swore that no word of this brother-man’s humiliation should darken the pages of the *Constitution*. Why, for the mere shadow of the eternal decencies, could not the woman abstain ?

“ You have consulted no one at all about this, Mrs. Pargeter ? It is quite your own idea.”

“ No one at all. It is quite my own idea.”

Norreys glanced again at the sheet.

“ I think that might be a little more clearly indicated,” he said. “ Here, for example, in the third paragraph. Perhaps—would you trust me to alter a word or two at greater leisure ? ”

Mary hesitated. "I would rather, I think, do it myself," she said. "Where, exactly? Have you a pencil?"

He pointed and explained, standing with knitted brows, while she, reflecting and agreeing, altered a line or two. Then he put the document in his breast-pocket.

"It shall be entirely as you wish," he told her. "And of course it *must* be remembered that you have had the gravest provocation. Had the unlucky wight but left you out of it! But your hand has been forced."

Mary rose.

"The measure I have to take is difficult and distressing, and I thank you for your sympathy, Mr. Norreys," she said, with a clear implication that she had no need of his excuses. "I am not sure that I am sorry that my hand has been forced. I begin to think that it was my duty to oppose my husband's candidature in any case. I must hope that he will not be returned. Afterwards I will do my best to make him see the inevitableness of my position. I think he will. He is very fair-minded. I will do my best to comfort him. I do not despair even of bringing him back to his original and far sounder political beliefs."

Norreys took her hand and bowed over it in silence. It was Norreys' greatest tribute; and it showed that in some sense Mrs. Pargeter had achieved the monumental. Certainly her words helped to reconcile him to what he had to do; already his acceptance of the matter

had grown lighter. To concern and regret had possibly been added resignation, in a party sense. He bowed and retired ; and but one word escaped him on the other side of the door.

“ Afterwards—— !! ”

CHAPTER XXV

LADY FLORA BELLAMY, as the crisis approached and the newspapers that came up with her tea in the morning grew more urgent in their demand for "workers—more workers," felt that she could no longer bear the inactivity to which she seemed condemned. Her whole soul, as she said many times a day, was abroad and absorbed in the election, while her body was obliged to fret within the four walls of her drawing-room in Knightsbridge. She did what she could ; she was now whole-hearted for the masses. She countermanded the *Morning Post*, refused all but the most desirable Unionist invitations, and wore the Socialist colours, which were not becoming, even when blended by Paquin. Leland having proved obdurate to all entreaties to let her "help," she had written more than once to Pamela, affectionately demanding some "tiny share" in the triumph they were all looking forward to. Could not Pamela's nice Mrs. James find a hole for her and a corner for Christine ? Christine, she honestly believed, might do splendid work ; she was *enragée* for the cause, and spoke English better every day.

But Pamela had been equally discouraging. Pamela feared that it was too late for fresh effort of any sort. They must now abide by the results of the past three months' work, and devote themselves to seeing that none of them escaped on polling day.

"As if it were ever 'too late'!" reflected Lady Flora. "I *know* I could send up his majority." And she saw visions, and dreamed dreams, and the dreams were all mystery, and magnanimity, and dramatic success, and ended in a small, thrilling paragraph in the newspapers.

Lady Flora had never been thwarted in all her days before, nor had anyone troubled to make her understand much of life beyond her very agreeable share in it. Leland she had not seen since he put her into her motor and sent her back to London via High Pollard, with Pamela conspicuous beside her. There had been a note or two, a dear little note or two, to say that of course she should have the earliest possible ticket for the Ladies' Gallery if he were in a position to offer it to her—that absurd "if"—and if she would be good and patient till the contest was over and he was again a free man instead of a dog on a chain. She had that and the memory of his kisses, and the quite new bond that his kisses had made between them, to keep her eyes bright and her mood restive as the days went on.

Gertrude Ambrose, too, had laughed at her, and not gently, which was difficult to bear.

Flora felt that she was beginning to find Gertrude Ambrose out. "You care nothing at all for our poor and depressed; it is only our rich and important that interest you," she charged this lady, as if she were a person from another planet, as perhaps, to Lady Flora, she was. Mrs. Ambrose was quite cynical about it.

"My dear, the same to you and more also," she said. "You care neither for the poor and depressed nor for the rich and important, but only for Leland Pargeter, who is very far from being the marvel you think him."

"I won't discuss the people with you, Gertrude. You're *too* heartless. But of course I love Leland devotedly. I would follow him—I warn you—to the ends of the earth."

"Don't!" said Mrs. Ambrose in a tone of satire.

"I shan't be asked," said Flora.

"Affairs in the Pargeter family," remarked Mrs. Ambrose, "do not move. Nobody knows anything. Developments are expected after the election, but there are people who persist in declaring that Mary Pargeter does not consider moral lapses on his part sufficient ground for a divorce. The law is more easily satisfied than the lady. Some strain of Jewish orthodoxy, I suppose. It's now thought by no means certain that she will bring the suit, whether or not he is returned."

"Even for Percy Acourt?"

"Acourt is furious, I hear, at the talk. He

would be. Wild horses won't drag him to Arlington Street."

"That's rather piggy, isn't it, after all she has done for the party?"

"Nobody who knows him doubts that he'll marry her in the end, if she does get rid of Pargeter. But it's also like him to loathe its being chattered about beforehand. And, of course, like every other Tory in the country, he has very little time for philandering just now."

"I adore to hear you say that! But I thought the Blackport seat was built on a rock!"

"Rocks may fly," said Gertrude mysteriously. She also read the *Constitution*—the last issues before the election—and her imagination, always active, had been stirred by its trumpet-note of warning. She left Lady Flora more excited than ever about the coming victory of the people, more determined than ever to "help."

The week before, Flora's motor had come home done up in the loveliest imaginable shade of red. So she must have meditated her plan; it was not altogether the sudden impulse she liked to think it. The motor was red, and George's grey livery had extremely clever touches of yellow. The turn-out took the winter Park, Lady Flora noted with content, like some strayed tropical bird, and left no doubt about the political leanings of its owner. She had retained the arms on the door-panels, so as not quite to forget who and what she was; and besides, they made the motor so much easier to identify, presumably in the dark. Otherwise it offered the purest appeal

to the democratic eye that it was possible for Lady Flora to conceive.

On Monday she took her great resolve and went down to Reading in the car. Christine went with her, guarding at least one costume in which Flora was a flash, a flame, something that might command the adoration of all hearts from the top of a barricade or a tea-table at the Pré Catalan. It finished with one of the twisted turban shapes that were so becoming to Lady Flora, dull purple, with a touch of gold and a single long orange feather like an arrow. And it fitted with a perfection Christine had no words for, nor have I. Lady Flora also took her dressing-case, in which were a turquoise necklace, quite a good one, a bracelet studded with Ceylon sapphires, and a couple of sapphire rings that had been given her in her girlish days. There was reason in this selection of gems in the dressing-case. She herself would wear a simple collar of small topazes, comparatively inexpensive, but of very good colour and well cut.

Lady Flora, Christine, George, and the car put up at an hotel in Reading for one night, where Lady Flora registered as Mrs. Forrester Bruce, combining in this device the maiden names of her two grandmothers. Concealment gave the adventure an elusive charm, a touch of mystery ; the two grandmothers made it not absolutely untrue, and added, like a sauce, the piquancy of possibly being found out. If all went well Lady Flora had every intention of being found out.

On Monday night, therefore, Lady Flora slept—not very well—at Reading. She started again on Tuesday morning; and after lunch she entered and motored straight across Leland Pargeter's constituency to the hamlet of Bingham, the centre of a paper-making industry, in which the Tyrrells had considerable interest, and which Pargeter had described to her, in the words of Bennett, as a nest of outlaws and rebels.

It will be seen that as an influence Lady Flora unconsciously put herself in motion in a very timely manner. Norreys had done his best in London, and the Conservative Association had done their best in High Pollard; but it was Tuesday noon exactly before the King's postmen were delivering to the voters of the constituency the circular letter to her friends in High Pollard by which Mary Pargeter formally, though in the simplest terms, repudiated Socialistic doctrine in politics, and stated her position in the current campaign to be in the most regretful, but the most complete antagonism to that of her husband.

“Much as I should like to do so I cannot ask you to vote for Mr. Pargeter,” she told them simply, “for the reasons I have given you; and I must beg you to accept this direct statement of what I think and believe, and to disregard any others that may have been pressed upon your consideration.”

Mary refrained from indicating where the votes she would deprive her husband of should be cast. Her letter was written with the

single intention of neutralizing the use that had been made of her in his interests. Nevertheless the scandal to the villas was great. The townspeople shook their heads over the way times were changing; Miss Agatha Tyrrell, Sir Hugh's sister, and an old friend of Mrs. Pargeter's, was so little alive to her brother's advantage as to weep over her copy of the circular. Sir Hugh himself, being an old-fashioned person, said, "Confound the thing—I shall jolly well let it alone;" and most people felt relief that it had happened so near the end of the contest. It was too late to be more than a piece of news, entertaining or depressing, as you might take it, except possibly among the very class upon whom Pargeter's chances most depended. The variable, mutable-to-the-last-moment element, outside the discipline of the unions, what importance would they attach to such a letter?

Each of these voters got it with his dinner, and it could hardly fail to attract attention, even at that hour. The few electors who could not read had usually wives who could. It reached, in the pauses of knife and fork, a surprising number of intelligences; and though certain of the shrewd ones put it down as a hoax, it went in many cases back to work in an inside pocket with the men. Whether or not the Labour vote generally would be influenced by Mrs. Pargeter's opinion, the Labour vote could not fail to be interested in such a domestic difference as it disclosed. And then the paper colony at Bingham was so doubtful.

It is plain that Lady Flora and Christine and George, pulling up in the red motor after many inquiries outside the mills at five that afternoon, had arrived exactly at the right moment.

CHAPTER XXVI

“**Y**OU understand perfectly, George, what you have to do, when this is over?” asked Lady Flora as they waited in the tranquillity that preceded the closing of the mills. “First you take me to the station at High Pollard, then go straight to Mr. Pargeter’s committee-room there and ask for the agent, whose name is Mr. Drake. Tell him that Lady Flora Bellamy has sent her car for use in conveying voters to the polls to-morrow. He will show you where to put up. And when to-morrow comes you are to put yourself under his orders. I think you will enjoy it, George.”

“Yes, my lady. I dare say, my lady!”

Lady Flora looked again at the pages of foolscap covered with graceful, pointed handwriting which lay in her lap, and at the little gold netted bag in her hand, with the glint of jewels inside, that had been so expensive three seasons ago.

“Christine,” she said, “I’ll have a tiny dose, I think. Is my hair all right?”

Christine told her she was perfect, found the little bottle in the dressing-case, and a little pot as well, from which she administered just a touch of fresh courage to Lady Flora’s cheeks. A dust

of powder wiped out all remaining traces of the journey ; Lady Flora might have stepped out of the hands of her face specialist in Bond Street.

A burst of shrill voices struck on the air from behind.

" Here they are," she said, and rose ; but the first comers, girls in twos and threes, passed, staring, before she could think of any way of addressing them. They looked interested enough, but she had not thought of girl operatives and had nothing ready to say, so she smiled pleasantly and waited. The girls stopped just out of speaking range for further observation, with a tendency to focus on George and express itself in laughter. As the first knot of men and boys appeared Lady Flora leaned toward them engagingly.

" Comrades," she said. " Comrades——"

They looked at her and at one another, hesitated, exchanged a word or two with broad grins, but did not check the slouching impetus that was taking them past her.

" I have something to say to you," she called out after them, and one turned and looked back ; but they kept on their way with a dull opposition to having anything said to them printed on their backs. Flora saw the whole tide likely to flow past her, and to the next group she sent George.

" Tell them that a lady wishes to speak to them," she said, and George told them that. Their male sheepishness as they came up was shared by George, who seemed glad to resume his seat in front, and his hand on the steering-bar.

“Comrades,” said Lady Flora, “come closer. Let me shake hands with you. I have driven all the way from London to-day just to do that—to shake hands with you.”

She held out her hand ; they could but take it.

“Goodish way, miss,” said one of them with the intention of courtesy—a young fellow with an open face.

“Not too far when your heart is in the Cause,” said Flora trippingly, “and I hope you know—I hope you realise that my heart *is* in the Cause, the great cause of universal brotherhood and freedom, and——”

“Votes for wimmin !” shrilled a half-grown boy, with his coat buttoned under his chin and a cap on the back of his head, and lurched away laughing. Two or three more at this joined the group ; others hovered, and the boy turned and took up a position favourable for independent comment, with an eye, in which hostility gathered, upon George. Several older men, seeing so attractive a motor-car, with so attractive a lady standing in it swinging a gold bag in her hand, drew up automatically.

“I think I see in every one of your honest faces that you, too, are pledged to the Cause,” Flora went on, feeling her magnetism to the very tip of the orange feather.

“Wot price the Cause ?” sang out the boy again, and there was a laugh.

“Vote for Polly Pargeter,” said another voice, in parrot falsetto, at the edge of the group. Christine, sitting with her sharp black eyes fixed

on the back of George's neck saw a dull red flush take possession of it.

"I hope you *will* vote for Mr. Pargeter," Flora went on undaunted. "That's what I've come to ask you to do."

"She 'opes we *will* vote for Mister Pargeter," came the imitative voice again. "That's wot she's come to *arsk* us to do-oo."

This was quite an unexpected reception, and Flora grew paler; the rouge spots stood out rouge spots for all the art of Christine. She tried to ignore the ribald voice. The group thickened about her.

"I suppose I can't expect you *all* to be gentlemen," she said reprovingly, and the voice said, "*Never* mind, dear!" The boy on the edge of the crowd was enjoying himself extremely; but the men, their hands thrust in their pockets, still listened in silence, with interested eyes upon the gold bag, that wandered curiously over Flora's person and questioned one another. The girls, fascinated by her clothes and irresistibly drawn by George, came nearer, with a giggling mixture of impudence and embarrassment, playing tricks on one another. The audience had increased into a collection of shabby felt hats and faces not exactly hostile, but rough, uncertain, and uneasy. Flora became aware of it as a corporate thing growing less friendly. The men's looks became ambiguous; one of them began to whistle. They seemed to chaff one another about her; she had suddenly a sense of the intolerable. Christine,

sitting up very straight, wore a look of furious indignation. Flora, with a hand that shook, straightened out her written pages.

"I want to convince you," she said, "that we of the so-called upper classes, some of us at all events, have your welfare very close to our hearts. We are advanced Socialists—as advanced as you are yourselves—and only ask—only ask"—she found the place at last—"to march with you as comrades in the great struggle for the rights of man. I have come down here to-day to beg you to vote for Mr. Leland Pargeter, because you will find him a comrade in that struggle. I myself have always found him a good comrade——"

A man in the front turned away, muttering something about "brass"; but in the main the group pressed closer, grew more intent. A couple of arrivals added themselves from the direction of the village. One of them wore a blue rosette.

"Where does 'is missis come in?" demanded this one, apparently to the company at large, though the inquirer avoided every eye and concentrated on finding his pipe. "I've 'ad a letter from 'is missus, I 'ave," he continued, "same as most of the chaps, and it don't make no mention of you, miss."

There was a rough guffaw, and somebody called out, "No—not likely."

The intention was so plain that George looked round for an order, but Flora, with an orange feather that trembled a little, stuck to her guns.

"Mr. Pargeter is an old friend of mine," she went on, "and I want him to win this election because——"

"'E's got quite a lot of old friends, Polly Pargeter has," announced somebody, and the companion to the blue rosette made a diversion by striding over to the group of girls.

"'Ere you, Liz," he said. "Get yourself 'ome. Get yourself 'ome now, an' not a word. Yes, it's just because I say so."

The girl moved off, one or two others with her. The men looked rather darkly at those that remained. A scuffle began on the fringe of the group; an unexpected clod of earth knocked George's cap over his eye.

"Because," quavered Flora, reading fast, "I believe in him. His doctrines are my doctrines. I was a Conservative once, as blue as anybody, but I am a Socialist now, an advanced Socialist; and I am going to prove it to you."

By this time there was a good deal of noise, but she could still be heard, and when she said that, the wearer of the blue rosette shouted: "Give the lady a chance, can't ye?" and obtained something like silence.

Flora took her chance, and held up her gold bag. No one eyed it with keener interest than the wearer of the blue rosette. Flora opened it, and drew out the turquoise necklace, and the sapphire bracelet, and the rings. She held them up with a graceful gesture.

"Here is all my blue," she said. "All the blue I ever had. I want to offer it to the Cause—to

your Cause and my Cause. I do not know what it is worth ; but you are very welcome to it, for I shall never wear any more blue."

She quite, for an instant, made her point, doubtful as she stood before them. With her delicate painted face and the jewels dropping down among them from her raised hand she was really rather charming. Somebody asked, " Bag included ? "

" Oh, yes," said Flora, " you may have the bag. And in return, of course "—she smiled—" of course, I hope you are all going to vote for Mr. Pargeter."

At that the chauffeur George turned his head.

" I'm afraid that's not legal, my lady," he said, and Christine, quick as thought, held out her hand for the necklace.

But the crowd was attending very closely, and there was an instant uproar of voices.

" No, you don't ! " " Did she give 'em, or didn't she ? " " 'Ere, lady, I'll take care of 'em ! "

A dozen hands were thrust out ; George found his cap again jammed over his eyes. Christine shrank back murmuring something about "*des lous*." Flora hesitated ; the man with the blue rosette pushed forward.

" 'Ere's one honest man's vote, lady," he said, and took off his rosette, and handed it to her. " 'Ere you are. It's all I can do ; and if you give them things to me, I'll take 'em to head-quarters and see they get taken care of."

Instantly the crowd seethed round her.

“Aw—will yer !” a dozen voices shouted, and protesting hands clutched at Flora’s arm.

“He don’t mean fair, lady ; he’s the wrong colour, he is ! Don’t you give ’im nothing ; he’s a wrong ’un ! He’ll bring it up agen you !”

But there was the blue rosette, a definite, tangible gain in all the clamouring, and there was Christine “*Voyons, madame, c’est insupportable !*” and there was George lifting a large mummied cat out from between his feet, and starting the car without orders. The convert’s companion had edged up to him, apparently to give support ; across the fields came figures running. The only thing Flora could not do was to take her bag of blue home with her. She dropped it quickly into the hands of the man who had bargained for it, and sank back into the car, while the crowd surged with angry talk round its possessor. Apparently he made good, and quickly enough to send a scurry of shouts after the motor. Flora could not distinguish what they said. Perhaps it was as well. George could, and he drove for the first mile or two with noticeable disregard for the regulations. Christine hunted about for the little bottle. When Flora had had another tiny dose, and had put her hair right, and when her heart ceased to pound quite so dreadfully against her ribs, she said :

“What was that nonsense you were talking about its not being legal, George ? I bribed nobody, and we secured one vote for Mr. Pargeter, anyway.”

"I'm afraid you've disqualified him, my lady," said George, who possibly still resented the cat.

"What can you possibly mean?"

"They were a rough lot, my lady; and I'm afraid that chap in blue was up to some game. I saw him take the car number, my lady."

"Oh, did you, George? Well, in that case, perhaps it will be as well not to let it go to the polls to-morrow," said Flora, with rapid decision. "You had better drive now straight back to town."

"Very well, my lady," said George, suppressing his private ultimatum as to the polls, which was that if the car must perform that service somebody else would have to be found to drive it. George was not a purist in morals, but there were certain misconstructions at which he drew the line.

Later that afternoon the candidate himself, all unaware of the picturesque effort that had been made on his behalf at Bingley, got up from the bed in which an attack of laryngitis had kept him for the last two days before the election, and was driven practically speechless from grand rally to grand rally. Bennett, accompanying, made the most of his invalid condition; all his supporters made the most of it. He presented a pathetic figure; and everybody realised how simply he might have stayed at home in bed, and how much less embarrassing, in view of what had happened, such a course would have been. Pamela, who made everywhere a brief little speech for him, was wildly

cheered. Pargeter, now, was "in trouble," in trouble with his missis, and his girl stood by him. Pamela held her head high; and voters had not to be told, though no reference was made to it, that both she and her father took the circular with spirit. Bennett declared, as he took Pargeter home, that it was likely to be infinitely precious to them. The men of North Brents were not going to encourage doings so likely to put notions into the heads of their wives. He had heard some of them say as much.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE following day, at about the hour of the opening of the polls in High Pollard and the sixty-nine other constituencies, including forty-one London divisions, which would make known their political pleasure before nightfall, Mrs. Pargeter's maid spread a certain consternation in the house by coming down with the news that her mistress was staying in bed. Mrs. Pargeter never stayed in bed. She was often lately not very well; but that state did not prevent her descending, in one of those charming rest-gowns which it was Elizabeth's duty to cherish, to her morning-room and Miss Woollen for the dispatch of business. When this was over she would consent to "put up her feet" on a sofa, and to give her mind to a novel or a magazine; but that she should wholly let go her grasp upon the day was almost unheard of. Yet there she was, docile and rather tremulous, among her pillows, explaining to Elizabeth that she was "just very tired," after sleeping the night through, just too tired to think of anything but rest, that Miss Woollen was to send certain telephone messages and return to Maida Vale, leaving everything over until to-morrow. To

Miss Woollen's anxious inquiries Elizabeth could only say that her mistress there in bed looked more like a "white pansy" than anything else, yet declined to see Sir Henry, at all events till the next day. Mrs. Pargeter was sure that all she wanted was rest; she might get up toward evening, but not if Elizabeth could prevent it.

Miss Woollen agreed with misgivings to do as she was told; and all that Wednesday, while blue and yellow fought it out in the polling division of High Pollard or North Brents, Mary rested. She rested, as it were, straightforwardly, sleeping as much as she could, keeping her mind from all speculation about the contest, because that, when one rested, was the right thing to do. Her imagination would hardly in any case follow her letter to the voters, partly because Mary's imagination did not travel well, and partly because, having written and sent it, she had discharged it like any other obligation; and it was not her habit to turn such things over afterwards. She had, I think, a settled conviction that Leland would be defeated by means of the letter; but she did not glance over High Pollard's shoulder reading it.

Nor was any picture with her of the villages she knew so well, noisy, agitated, and alive with every kind of progress to the polls—the motors and waggonettes decked with blue, the babies and nurses decked with blue, the toddling wearer of a sandwich board which entranced all be-

holders with its "Vote for Uncle Hugh," also decked with blue, or the more occasional turn-out and more frequent plodding group that wore the rosette of flaming yellow. She did not see the last burst of persuasion in all colours that sprang out in the night on every convenient tree and wall and hoarding: "North Brents for Tyrrell and Old England," "High Pollard Votes for a Living Wage," "High Pollard for Pargeter," or the sudden and sinister question that flew up and down the constituency in black letters on a narrow band of white: "What Do We Know About Pargeter?" The decorated animals, and the vans, and the braying horns, and the feeling of the arrow escaping at last from the bent bow and the taut string, were just one hundred and five miles from Mary's pillow. Of her husband as her husband, roused for the first time in his life, anxious as years had not seen him anxious, tense, nervous, and horribly disturbed at last, not at the idea of failure, but at the possibility of failing with ridicule, she had no perception, or almost none. Leland was to her as much less than her husband as duty is less than love. Years ago he had left her heart, now he had left her house; and for the shadow that still lay across these thresholds she had just the careful regard and consideration she might have for any other guest.

She thought more about the Blackport contest, frankly speculating and hoping. She could do that without a pang of conscience. And she

dwelt on the consideration of the weather, which was mild, with a west wind that touched her cheek from an open window and made it paler. She was glad of the moderate weather for the election; she remembered Acourt's saying that it made a difference of three figures to his win.

For Blackport, too, polled to-day. She had not seen Percy Acourt for nearly a month, not, indeed, since the single and rather formal visit of congratulation he had paid her after Norreys' announcement in the *Constitution*. He had written; but his people were keeping him very much at home; he told her he was canvassing the docks like a new-comer. She saw that the ex-Premier had been speaking at Blackport. "They are all anxious," she reassured herself, "to increase their majorities." Acourt's had never dropped below five hundred, even in the *débâcle* of 1906; and Blackport had a long, clear Tory record.

The day wore on, and Mary rested. Towards five o'clock she attempted to get up; but a little faintness before the maid had answered the bell hinted that she had not quite rested enough, and Mrs. Pargeter asked Elizabeth for tea instead.

"Tell Parkinson to serve dinner as usual," she said. "I will be down."

By that time the newsboys were shouting extra specials in the street with unopposed returns; and Mrs. Pargeter remembered that she had not made the arrangement she might

have made, to have the day's results sent over her private tape.

"That was stupid of me," she reflected. Mary never hesitated to charge herself with stupidity. She sent out for the extra specials, which contained nothing that she did not already know, except some details about the illuminated announcement of the returns that evening in Trafalgar Square. The early winter darkness closed over the world outside, a world which made fictitious muffled sounds of excitement, as if it knew things that could not yet be known. Mary had never felt so aloof, so neglected, so withdrawn. There was an impropriety about it which began presently to prevent her from resting as completely as she ought.

By half-past seven she was dressed and down, feeling again as well as usual. After dinner she felt, if anything, better than usual, and Elizabeth, waiting for orders, told her, with admiration, that her colour had come back. In reply, Mrs. Pargeter told Elizabeth to ask for the electric brougham, and to put on her own things.

"We will go out, Lizzie," she said, "and see what we can. I am quite rested, and should like the air. See that you are warmly wrapped up."

Elizabeth had every inclination to protest, but lacked the courage. And, after all, it would be an outing. She saw that her mistress at all events was warmly wrapped up; and presently they were slipping in and out among the crowd that

already thronged Piccadilly. The brougham wore every sign of importance and of discretion; policemen were friendly to it, taxi-cabs respectful. It was guided, as by a sort of conspiracy, from one point of vantage to another. The crowd surged about it; in the muddy streets the big red "Generals" pushed past among the hampering people. There seemed in every direction to be miles of moving people; the lamplit darkness was charged with their expectancy. They gazed up at certain brightly lighted window spaces; or moved to better sight of a large white sheet, which also promised information, on the best terms with each other, on the best terms with the police, waiting for that something to happen which was no doubt in the long run important, but was certainly for the moment entertaining. The brougham windows were down; the crowd bestowed glances freely upon the beautiful lady inside with her maid, the humble, generous, admiring glances of the London crowd which takes its entertainment with such appreciation, as it comes.

"Isn't it exciting, Lizzie?" said she. "So many different types of people. How many there are in the world to be sure!"—and Lizzie made a suitable response.

A sudden roar arose, a burst of cheering, with a refrain of boos and groans. A London division had announced itself from the bright high window as again Liberal. The chauffeur, intensely interested, gave her the majority.

"No Change" flashed out the beacon window, and again the people roared; hats went up into the dark; men shouted the bywords of the campaign; somebody started the chorus of a song. There was great laughter; it was not clear about what. Mary looked a little disapprovingly from her window at the crowd.

"It doesn't seem very serious," she told Lizzie, and Lizzie, who would have given her boots to get out and join it, said: "No, ma'am."

The next return doubled the answering enthusiasm. "Lib. Gain" jumped into words in the high darkness. Again the chauffeur, with barely concealed excitement, communicated the result.

"Let down the top, Robb," said Mary. "I must see for myself."

"Oh, ma'am!" expostulated Lizzie.

"No, I won't take cold. And I don't like all this cheering, Robb. Couldn't we find a place opposite the *Pall Mall Gazette's* announcements?"

"It will be just as bad, ma'am, and there's hardly standing room over there."

"Yes, but—— Oh, very well! Perhaps we are as well as we are. What is that? Hampstead! Ah, that's better! Naturally we hold Hampstead." But the crowd was not mainly of those that held Hampstead, and Mary heard the reception of the return with rather a regretful face.

"Robb," she said, "if you and Filkins would like to express your feelings at the next Conservative victory, do so."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Robb. His mistress had taken his politics for granted; but, as Gertrude Ambrose said, the country was honeycombed, and the process had extended in some cases even under the areas of Arlington Street.

The crowd, wearying of the pauses, amused itself by making demands, shouting challenges, letting off witticisms. Political portraits thrown on the screens kept the people good-humoured and critical. They cheered Calthorpe with a certain deference. Ashley Venn excited them to applause and laughter; they roused themselves heartily for the King. Nobody went home because it grew later and colder. The feet of the crowd seemed shufflingly glued to the pavements and their eyes to the blank bright squares above their heads, fascinated with the silhouettes of the moving figures handling the returns. As a Liberal crowd, moreover, it began to be amply rewarded, and three State Labour gains had produced great demonstration from persons who looked as if their hands had never been anywhere but in their pockets. By eleven o'clock the run of Liberal success had set in steadily; and Mrs. Pargeter, with her yawning maid beside her, showed as little inclination to leave Trafalgar Square as any of those who assisted. Two anxieties had sprung desperately at her; and the result of her husband's candi-

nature was not the keenest. That came first; it was just midnight.

HIGH POLLARD

Tyrrell (U.)	5,641
Pargeter (Lab.)	5,633

NO CHANGE.

Mary sat in the corner of the brougham as still and as stiff as any of her excellently trained servants, while people round her made their not very pronounced comment upon the judgment of this constituency. Farther off she heard a cheer; it was the first Unionist return in ten. Somebody in the crowd, before the shouts quite died away, exclaimed in a high falsetto "Poor Polly Pargeter!"—and Mary, taking in the meaning of the cry, frowned and flushed. She reflected afterwards that it must have been somebody from home.

"It was very near, was it not, Elizabeth?" she said; and Elizabeth agreed regretfully. There was no servant in Mrs. Pargeter's house that did not hope her husband would be returned, quite independently of his politics.

Robb cocked his depressed ear for the order to return, but Mary still sat watching the news from aloft. She had another twenty minutes to wait. Then came "Blackport," and she learned amid the crowd's odious applause that Percy Acourt had been rejected by his old constituency by two hundred and eleven votes.

The night had nothing more to say to her, but she waited for two more returns, for decency's sake, from which she derived no information whatever. Then she told Robb to go home.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ELIZABETH confessed downstairs that Mrs. Pargeter at the breakfast-table next morning was "the last thing" she expected to see. The "results" in the eyes of the household constituted a calamity, in any case an event of great gravity, and were bound to produce a sleepless night, if nothing worse followed sitting in Trafalgar Square until all hours waiting for them. But Mary came down, apparently all the better for her adventure; Elizabeth it was who had taken cold. Things were to go on as usual; she would even later have Miss Woollen, and receive later still a senior official of the house of Lossell. It was snowing hard after the thaw; and a telegram went to Miss Woollen postponing her till eleven—the snow supplied a reason for that.

There was another reason. Mary had letters to write, for which she knew she would dislike even Miss Woollen's small dry cough and small dry presence in the room. She sat down to her letters very thoughtfully. There was a gay little fire; the morning papers were heaped beside her; her desk was fragrant with flowers from the Hareham conservatories. Mary loved flowers, admired even their botanical disguises;

her gardeners did great things at exhibitions, and splendid blooms with cards on them climbed to every foothold in Arlington Street. She usually went about the room touching them lovingly, taking happiness from the beautiful friendship of their faces, before she began her day. But this morning she sat down at once to her desk. Grave matters possessed her mind, which was occupied, scrupulously first occupied, with the thought of her husband.

She glanced at the spot on the hearthrug from which Leland had told her of his political intentions, just in front of the Sèvres clock on the mantelpiece. It was empty now. Would he ever stand on the hearthrug in this private room of hers again? It was what she must make possible—make even inviting. She took up her pen.

“MY DEAR LELAND,

“Now that everything that divides us politically is over, at all events for the present, I cannot forbear”—she paused and looked for a long minute at the fire—“to tell you,” her pen went on, “how truly sorry I am that circumstances forced me to take the step of overt opposition to you that I did feel compelled to take. We have both, I firmly believe, acted according to our consciences in what has passed. We have therefore neither explanations nor apologies to offer to one another. There is, however, the future to consider.”

Mary paused again, but not for long. She

now dipped her pen into benevolence as she understood it; and it was a ready fount.

“About the future I want to make my desire and my hope plain to you. I beg that you will return to your old life here, with perhaps some such interval of travel abroad as may serve to make the world forget our difference of opinion—and for my part I shall be more than glad to do all that lies in my power to recompense and console you for this disappointment.”

She pondered another sentence or two, but it would not come sincerely, so she added nothing to that but : “I am, as ever,—Your affectionate wife,
“MARY PARGETER.”

She addressed the letter to her husband at Worsham, and took another sheet, which she covered slowly, but without hesitation, as if the phrases lay prepared and ready in her mind.

“DEAR PERCY,

“I cannot tell you the great shock this is to what has become my deepest interest in life, the adoption by the nation of the political creed in which you have taught me to believe. Of the reverse to you personally I will say nothing—you will know how I feel about that. I am cheered to think that at worst it can be but a temporary check; and to you I am sure it will be obscured in the darkness of this morning’s outlook for England—ominous indeed I fear, unless things change almost incredibly in the North. Nevertheless, I shall be glad to learn your

plans as soon as you have formed them. I shall be in town until Saturday. With profound regret.—Yours sincerely,
“MARY.”

A footman came in with a telegram. It was from Miss Woollen, announcing an attack of bronchitis. Miss Woollen would be unable to come at all that day. Mary reflected that she was not altogether sorry, in view of all there was to think about. Especially as now that the letters were finished, she felt unaccountably not quite so well as she had before.

“And Lady Flora Bellamy is in the drawing-room, ma’am,” said the servant. “Her ladyship told me to say that she wished to see you very particularly, ma’am.”

Mary hesitated. What could Flora possibly want? Virtue went out of her always into Flora. She had no knowledge of that, but she did know that she sometimes found her little friend fatiguing. She was by no means sure that she had rested enough. But the flying flakes outside the window decided her. She could not deny herself.

“Bring Lady Flora in here,” she said.

“Very good, ma’am.”

And Flora, to whom the morning’s news had brought a momentous, long-contemplated resolution, followed the footman with every nerve taut. She followed him with a step not quite assured. In spite of her claims upon her distinguished friend, claims which Mary had always honoured, she had never been summoned to

this private room before. She wondered, as she went, whether it was going to make more difficult or easier what she had come to say. It was a tremendous thing, what she had come to say ; it would leave her either a heroine or a worm ; she was not certain which.

“ Ah, Flora ! What weather, dear ! ”

Mary bent a cheek to be caressed, but Flora held herself stiffly away from their clasped hands.

“ No,” she said, “ I must not kiss you.”

“ And why not ? ” demanded Mary, with gentle amusement. “ Have you got a cold ? ”

“ No, I haven’t got a cold, but——”

Lady Flora opened her eyes very wide and tragically, and closed her lips as if nothing more should ever escape them. She looked as if fascinated at Mary, still clinging to her hand.

“ Sit down,” said Mary. “ Dear child, you look quite white. What is it ? ”

She touched a bell as she spoke.

“ Please—please don’t send for anything. I am not ill.”

“ Is it bad news then, dear ? You have had a shock ? You are distressed about something. Tell me. Some port, please,” she said to the servant in the door, “ and some biscuits, Thomas.”

Mary’s mind, in succour, flew as naturally to port and biscuits as a bird to a branch.

“ I *wish* you wouldn’t,” said Flora weakly, with a sudden trembling of the lip.

“ Take off your furs, dear child, and lie back in your chair. We shall have ever so cosy a

talk ; poor Miss Woollen is laid up with bronchitis. What a lovely stole that is ! ”

Flora unfastened the lovely stole, and struggled with some success for self-control. But she sat up very straight with an eye on the door for the reappearance of Thomas. There must be a sealed privacy for what she had to say. Mrs. Pargeter perceived this, and went on talking about her visitor's ermines. Thomas returned, bearing his tray, and at a nod from Mrs. Pargeter, left it with them, closing a careful door.

“ I cannot bear to see you unhappy, dear,” said Mary, pouring out a glass of wine. “ Life isn't easy for any of us, but sometimes we can help one another. Tell me about it.”

“ Oh, if you only *would* help.”

“ Tell me how I can.”

“ You will hate me when I tell you.”

“ Oh, I don't think so ! ” Mary smiled.

“ Yes, you will—you will. Oh, this dreadful election—how thankful I am that it is over, even if we have been defeated.”

“ It isn't over,” said Mary. “ It isn't even half over. And who are ‘ we ’ ? I thought you had gone to the Radicals, Flora. Have you come back again ? ”

Mary spoke lightly and pleasantly, but her mind was busy with queries. Could Lady Flora—imaginably—want her to modify anything, now or against any contingency of Leland's standing again ? And, if so, whose messenger was she ? Had Leland sent her ? Mary had long known about their friendship, had often heard

Flora's lamentations on the score of her divided affections. She waited quietly for a reply.

"By 'we' I mean Mr. Pargeter and I."

It was a little startling. Mary lifted her eyes slowly from the fire and let them rest on Lady Flora. Then they travelled considerably to the table.

"Were you then, indeed, so identified with his campaign?" she said softly. The words fell, in spite of her, like drops from an icicle.

"I? Oh, I could have helped! I know I could. The very last day I went down in my car and did some speaking, and I know I captured at least a dozen votes, though he knew nothing about it, and probably never will unless I tell him myself."

"And why shouldn't you tell him yourself?"

"There is no reason. I will—some day. I did my best for him and for the Cause. I emptied my jewel-box—but that doesn't matter. And you defeated him. Did you sleep well last night, Mrs. Pargeter?"

"Oh, yes, thank you!"

"I wonder how *he* slept? How I longed to console him!"

Mary just lifted her eyes.

"Be a little careful what you say, dear."

Flora felt that she was not coming to the point. The point seemed far away, floating in circles, baffling to penetrate. She picked up the end of her expensive scarf and took courage from it.

"I suppose you admit that you have ruined

his political career ? Oh, how I hate to say these things to you ! ”

“ I am afraid you must not expect me to discuss the matter, Flora.”

“ Oh, *please*, discuss it ! Otherwise I shall never be able to tell you what I have come to tell you.”

Mary was silent, weighing the importance of anything Flora might have come to tell her. Then she said :

“ You may tell me anything that concerns yourself, quite freely, dear, but I do not look to you for information about my husband.”

She spoke with difficult kindness.

“ You have defeated him—you have defeated him ! ” cried Flora, springing up. “ And now you must divorce him.”

Mary looked for an instant simply amazed and astonished. The suggestion, as we know, was not new to her, but that it should come from the lips of Flora Bellamy——

“ Why ? ” she said involuntarily.

“ Because you have ruined his life,” said Flora, in a high note of tragedy. “ And there are other reasons,” she suddenly faltered, looking down.

The gravity in Mary’s face deepened, rubbing out the surprise. She began to understand. People were talking ; Flora had heard, and this was an appeal. A very foolish and inexcusable appeal, but not—this seemed odd to her afterward—the intolerable liberty it would have been a month ago. An idea occurred to her. Yes, of course it was that.

“ You came to say this on my husband’s behalf, did you not, Flora ? ” she asked calmly. “ That was a difficult thing, and a courageous thing for you to do. But not at all a proper thing. And if we are to see each other any more, we must try to forget that you have done it.”

Flora kept her humble eyelids on the floor.

“ I have come to say it on my own behalf,” she replied distinctly, in a low voice. “ I have told you there are other reasons. I—your little friend Flora—I am one of the reasons.”

She lifted her gaze at that and let it rest, full and limpid, upon Mrs. Pargeter’s.

“ I don’t know why you call me ‘ my child,’ ” she went on. “ We are women together. And you know what I mean.”

For an instant the colour drained out of Mary’s face.

“ *You !* ” she said simply, for an instant appalled. Then a veil slipped over her face, which looked older, sterner, behind the sudden observation of its expression. As she looked at Flora everything faded from it but observation, from a point of view withdrawn and remote, observation very hostile to this thing that she had heard.

Flora sank quickly—too quickly—down upon the floor, and clasped Mary’s feet.

“ Ah, don’t judge me ! ” she cried. “ And don’t—don’t look at me like that. Can’t you think I was more sinned against than sinning ? Don’t you know his perfectly irresistible charm !

What could I do against it, poor little me! I tell you I love him——”

Flora was no longer agitated. She spoke fluently; her eyes were bright and dry, and behind them something, intensely alert, watched Mrs. Pargeter's face.

Mary gently detached herself, walked over to the window, and stood there looking out at the falling snow. Thus turning her back, she gave Lady Flora an opportunity of getting up, which she took. When Mary turned she was sitting in her chair again, clasping her knees and staring enigmatically at the fire.

“I find what you tell me difficult to believe, Flora.”

“Do you want the time and the place?” asked Flora, with wonderful bitterness, and as Mary did not answer, she went on:

“One night after the theatre—I can tell you the very play: ‘Her Husband's Decree,’ that terrible thing of Chester Cummins's—he begged me to let him come in, and why did I? Why did I? But he looked so worn and unhappy, and you had been unkind to him—oh, yes, desperately—about High Pollard; and I did. That was the beginning, and since—— Oh, don't ask me! Don't ask me!”

Flora covered her face with her delicately gloved hands, and swayed to and fro with a movement not at all unlike Audrey Tavistock's.

“I haven't asked you,” said Mary quietly.

“You won't do it—I know you won't do it, for your own sake!” wailed Flora,

and Mary saw that she looked through her fingers.

At that Flora had a fleeting knowledge of how some small, infringing animal might shrink from its deserts. She had meant to declare, to expose, to passionately invoke Mary's love for Acourt, and implore, as woman to woman, that she might be forgiven for loving Leland just like that. But she fled hurriedly from this aspect, which towered impossible, terrifying, before she had even hinted it.

"Nor for his, though you put out his glimmering genius. Gertrude Ambrose says it is a glimmering genius, and that you put it out; but I don't care what she says, he is far more brilliant than she is. And it isn't only Gertrude—*everybody* thinks you might. And when this happened to me, I said to myself: 'She may not care what they say, she is so much above them; but she will do justice—she will do justice to her little friend, to whom Leland Pargeter owes reparation, and would make it if he could.'"

The last sentence came easily. Flora's heart was beating more comfortably; she was beginning again to remember sentences. Mary put her elbow on the desk beside her, and her hand over her eyes, which were turned away from the graceful little arrangement of fur and velvet in the chair.

"I think Sir Andrew Fairchild would be best," she said aloud.

Flora looked at her, watchful but not understanding. She saw very great concern in Mary's

face, and felt, behind it, another thing that told her she had gone somehow, somewhere, deplorably wrong. But she could not fail; she turned sick from the idea of failure. Mary must at least believe her. She sprang up as though tortured, and took quick steps across the room.

"I knew it would be hard," she exclaimed. "But I did not think it would be as hard as this. Oh, it is a hideous thing to be a woman, and to be abased, dragged in the dust before another woman. I could curse the God that made me what I am—and you, who have never known what temptation is! Oh, you are hard—cruel! I was wrong to love you; everybody is wrong to love you!"

She locked her hands and held them stiffly down before her as she paced; her face was stricken, her eyes tragic. Mary watched her steadily, making no reply; and presently Flora glanced at her. The glance determined Mrs. Pargeter, who got up, walked quietly to the door and turned the key in it, which she put on her desk.

"It will be better to be quite safe from interruption," she said, and Flora, surprised, sobered, and a little frightened, was the more ready to accept the explanation as it was plainly made only for the sake of appearances. She preferred the plausible to the actual always. She felt on safer ground there.

"Sit down, Flora. It tires me to see you walking about like that."

Flora threw herself into a chair with an

abandon which remembered how to fall, and waited.

"I am very deeply concerned at what you tell me."

"I don't think you believe me," interrupted Flora.

"You are quite right. It is clever of you to see that. I am glad to say I do not believe you at all."

"Why don't you?" Flora's tone was almost curious. Mary put her aside.

"Never mind just why. I have good reasons. One of them is that I know my husband very well, and I know, too, his opinion of you. I have often heard him speak of you in terms of affection—and respect, Flora."

"Yes, before——"

"Always. I do not believe your story, and I somehow imagine that you did not intend me to believe it, altogether."

"Yes, I did," said Flora, taken aback.

"Not altogether, I think. You are very fond of poor Leland, are you not? Very fond of him, and quite innocently, I am sure. So many people are. He is an attractive creature. And you thought you would do him a good turn, even at the expense of treachery to yourself. I don't think you quite counted the cost of that."

"Yes, I did," said Flora again. "I put the world in the balance——"

"No, not quite. Treachery to oneself—to the very inner citadel—is rather a serious matter physically. It means terrible—decadence, if

only that. It ought to be reported to a doctor. Have you ever been advised a rest cure, Flora ? ”

“ Often. But I have a horror——”

“ May I write to Sir Andrew Fairchild ? ”

“ Oh, please, *please*, no ! ”

“ I know him very well. You could not be in better hands. And a story like yours deserves medical attention, Flora. If you quite—mean it—as you say you do, it is a delusion, a hallucination, and I should not feel justified—— And you know where they lead to, these hallucinations ? You know what they mean ? Have you ever had any others ? ”

“ No, no. Never any others. I don’t—I don’t want a doctor. I am perfectly well.”

“ I am not satisfied, Flora. I must telephone to Sir Andrew. It is his consultation hour ; he could be with us very soon. You will not mind telling him this story that you have told to me. Doctors hear many such things, you know.”

“ Mrs. Pargeter,” faltered Flora. “ It wasn’t a hallucination.”

“ What was it then ? ”

“ It was just a lie. A great, terrible, shameful lie that I wanted to lie for his sake. Only for him— You will believe that, won’t you, darling Mrs. Pargeter ! He *is* miserable, you know—he *is* ! ”

She stopped, frightened by the sudden livid pallor of Mary’s face.

“ Shall I ring ? ” she asked quickly. Mary said “ No,” and pointed to the decanter. Flora

seized her own untouched glass of wine, and gave it to her.

"You must lie down," Flora exclaimed.

"Yes, I must," she whispered, and Flora supported her to a sofa which stood as if ready for just such emergencies. Flora quickly pulled the pillows into place, and Mary sank down upon them with a long sigh. She closed her eyes, and Flora silently drew a low chair nearer and sat beside her, holding one of her hands. With trembling fingers she unfastened her own little jewelled salts-bottle and gently offered it. Mary shook her head, but seemed grateful to be fanned with the wide palm leaf that Flora found at her elbow. The clock ticked and the fire dropped, and there was no other sound as Flora fanned and some long moments passed. The silence was a strange and sudden check to the sharp little drama that had so vividly filled the room a little while ago. Presently Mary opened her eyes, colour showed faintly again in her lips, a shadow seemed passing out of her face.

"Thank you, dear, so much," she said.

Flora went on fanning, but her eyes filled and two large tears fell down upon the ermine scarf.

"Thank you, Flora," said Mary again. "I have just had a very bad dream about you; you told me an absurd and wicked story about yourself. It was a hallucination on my part. It *was* a hallucination, was it not, Flora? Of mine."

The tears dropped faster. Flora bent over the hand she held and kissed it.

“Y-yes,” she sobbed, “it was.”

“Then,” said Mary, “we must forget it as quickly as possible. And now, dear, unlock the door, and go away, will you, and send me Elizabeth.”

CHAPTER XXIX

THE election swept on ; there is no other word for its progress. Poor Mary's Trust Fund for the farmers, launched too late for serious consideration, rolled like a derelict upon the tide. The light-minded masses, out for the plunder of incomes, hardly looked at it. It was one of the early years of active democratic sway in England, when power and opportunity were suddenly realised to the full, and the idea still reigned among the people of how most signally to assert themselves. Privilege had begun to go down like the poor images of a cult under a horde of hammers. It was already long since persons attached to the old regime had comforted themselves with the assurance that the people loved a lord, long since that affection had been proved abstract and social, and by no means cherished to the point of fatuity. The task of depriving the barons of their political entity was fully accomplished in that year ; the peer in the arena was henceforth to figure, so to speak, in his shirt-sleeves. Majesty remained, deeper rooted in the hearts of the people ; but its levées and drawing-rooms were at once less and more popular ; the roots required and obtained assiduous watering.

Majesty kept a circling eye, and a ship ever ready, upon its far Dominions; but as yet nobody talked of moving the Court, except an old Scotch peer who murmured of his vision, and Norreys, who got into trouble with his proprietor for publishing a forecast of that sort. Socialistic taxation reached that year its most alluring aspect. All the world, with incomes under the statutory exemption, blew this soap bubble, and Canada profited incalculably from the money tide that set steadily across the Atlantic. It was a record year for the emigration of the upper middle-classes, the year that marked for later history, more definitely than any other, the great drift away that left the island the beloved but embarrassing responsibility to the race that elderly relatives so often become.

Leland's interest in the constituency of High Pollard went out like a blown candle, the night he shook hands with Sir Hugh Tyrrell upon the declaration of the polls, thus offering the last drop of its entertainment to the blue and yellow electorate that hooted and jostled in the square of the Town Hall. It went out like a blown candle, leaving all the unpleasantness of imperfect combustion in poor Leland's fastidious nostrils. It left him, too, with a sense of spent resources which he knew to be more serious. He was quite aware that he had years ago worked out the vein of his life. He had written as well, had talked as well as ever he would, perhaps better than ever he would. But there always

had been this unexplored pocket of politics, wilfully neglected, but doubtless, when he should give it his attention, ever so broad and deep. Now that, too, was exhausted. He wrote the next evening before the fire, a fantasy upon bankruptcy of the spirit. It was a bitter, clever little thing; and he was faintly consoled by the thought that his pen still had point enough to do it.

Leland left Worsham as soon as he found it possible. A day or two had been obligatory; he was not a schoolboy running away from a game, but he panted to be gone. His new beliefs lay somewhere in the cellar of his spirit, withered and killed. The realities of life had been mephitic to them. Leland would never disavow them there; but the cellar would be their tomb.

Pamela took charge of the house behind the evergreens for the further short time of packing what her father called his "necessaries of life," his books and pictures, bronzes and brasses and bits of Jacobean furniture, and of paying outstanding bills. Pamela was glad to undertake these duties, and to hurry Pargeter away from Worsham. She distrusted the future more than he did; but Worsham made the present acute. She gave him the latchkey of her little flat in Kensington. He would go there, for many good reasons, for the present; and Harriet, all silent satisfaction, was despatched the day before to make ready. Leland drew a cheque against the bills and gave it to Pamela, asking her to let him

know if it was not enough. It was far from being enough ; but Pamela did not let him know. The advance on her novel from Mowbray more than covered the difference.

A week later Pamela joined him in London. It would be more accurate to say that she joined the place where a not too fugitive smell of cigars indicated that he had been. Richard Emmett, as he took her up in the lift, congratulated her with respectful point upon having Mr. Pargeter with her now ; but his niece Harriet reported gloomily that meals ordered were as often as not uneaten, though kept 'ot for howers. Though Mr. Pargeter did appreciate the bath with boiling water at all times from the basement, ever so, Harriet would say that, and never complained either about being obliged to dress in the bathroom or to sleep in the camp-bed in the odd chamber which was too tiny for anything else. Harriet was only "worried" about one thing—Mr. Pargeter's clothes. The wall cupboard in the little odd room simply would not contain them ; and Miss Pargeter must not be surprised to find her own single wardrobe half-full of them, to say nothing of boots and hats. Now that Pamela had returned she saw that Harriet meant to carry her long-contested point about "a 'all-stand," if it were only to establish Mr. Pargeter as a permanency. Mr. Pargeter was to be captured indefinitely ; to that end he must be made comfortable ; Harriet would "worry" until he was.

"And he's looking none too well, miss," said

Harriet. "Not such as you'd like to see him. Ten years older, and very 'ollow about the face. But there—they elections they're enough to kill anybody. And didn't get in, miss, after all 'is trouble, pore Mr. Pargeter. I *was* dis'pointed when I heard of it."

"A good many people were disappointed, Harriet," said Pamela, "and I knew you would be. My father writes that he can't be here till to-morrow evening. Are these all the letters?"

"No, miss, there's one on the drawin'-room mantelpiece; yesterday it came"—and Harriet, with rather a conscious look, disappeared to fetch it. Harriet was honourably above the reading of letters, but she specialised in addresses, dates, and postmarks.

Pamela, sitting among the ruins of all things in Worsham, had written to Percy Acourt immediately, a long, impulsive letter, discussing what had happened with their old warmth of comradeship, and catching with little disguise at her new freedom. She had done all that she could for her father. As the test of the campaign went on, and she clearly saw his derived forces failing and ebbing in him, a scruple on his behalf had added itself to those she felt on her own—would a victory be, after all, in his interests? What would he make of the great and groaning burden he had so lightly undertaken, if the event did place it on his shoulders? But she had put this away with the rest, and had stood beside the unfriended Leland with a loyalty that never betrayed its difficulty.

Now that it was over—well, it was over ; and Mr. and Mrs. Gommie could tell her how completely, if she had not guessed herself.

“ I like to think,” she wrote to Acourt, “ that you did wish us well here, at whatever expense to your conscience ; but I cannot be sorry that we are not likely to ask you to wish us well again. I am convinced that papa has had already so much more than enough of politics that the safest seat in the kingdom would not tempt him to enter the House.”

That was her only reference to High Pollard. The rest was all Blackport, and Blackport’s unimaginable decision, the reverse to their party, the postponement of their ideals, and what it all meant to the country. It was almost a passionate letter ; and here was his reply.

It did not take long to read the careful, checked sentences, or for Pamela, reading, to become aware of some new consideration, formless and paralysing, that had hung in his mind as he wrote. For Pamela, too, it was a quick and easy matter to feel it and to measure it.

“ The honourable and gallant Member for Blackport has never been defeated before,” she said to herself, with her old smile of perception, feeling once more in the balance against his aim and his future, and swinging rather high.

“ He is out of it for the moment, and he hates himself out of it even for a moment, and he is desperately, desperately perturbed. Yes,” she went on, smiling to herself, “ ‘ perturbed ’ is the word he would use.

“ They are bound to find him a seat—but it will be sooner or later. More important people than he will have first to be provided for. He may see it all slipping away—his whole life and purpose. Oh, I know—I know. And it is such an unimpeachable—such a lofty life and purpose.”

“ We might go to Canada with everybody else,” she said to herself with irony. “ Percy and his traditions—Percy and his genial manners!—would be so useful in the House at Ottawa.”

She made this show of private bravado ; but it was with literally chilled fingers that she put the letter back into its envelope and slipped it among the others on her dressing-table, and lay down upon her bed to rally her thoughts of it. Harriet, in the kitchen, was making tea ; she could hear the energetic bustle at the range. There was nothing to do, in her pain and humiliation, but to wait for tea. Pamela had also the amused feeling of that. She tried hard to jeer at herself, lying on her bed in the misery of a rebuff from Percy Acourt. Who, after all, and what, was Percy Acourt, that he should be able to hurt like that ? She railed under her breath at the girl on the bed in her misery. “ You, *you* ! ” she said softly. “ You know about things ; you can balance things as well as he ! Is he after all worth your self-respect, your proper pride ? Would you let a woman in one of your own novels be thought of in these terms, be held with her own consent even as cheap as

the greatest prize of the highest calling in the world ? ”

She ran off these charges with shut wet eyes, and yet as if she found some support in them. At all events, when Harriet rapped, she replied with a brisk “ Come in ! ”

“ I’ve lit the drawing-room fire, miss ; but I dare say you’d better ’ave it ’ere, the wind not being from the north to-day your gas grate is sufficient.”

So everything was over and the same again. Nothing had been surmounted or conquered or changed in the last three months ; and her golden afternoon at High Pollard had been just a golden afternoon. That sun had set as suns always did set ; she had been oh, such a bitter fool, to see it shining ever since. She was back in Pembroke Mansions, with Harriet and her tea-pot ; and the day was greyer than before.

CHAPTER XXX

“YES, miss,” said Harriet, and went to the telephone, presently returning.

“Mr. Pargeter sends word he’s going out of town and to tell you he won’t be ’ome for lunch, not as he expected to be. And Briggs is a-comin’ to pack ’is things, miss. Immediate. It was Briggs at the telephone. Mr. Pargeter told him to say he ’ave written.”

“Well,” said Pamela after a moment’s thought, “in that case we needn’t bother about lunch, Harriet. Get something for yourself when Budge calls. I won’t be in till about three. Papa did say something about a week or two on the Riviera. It will give us more time to get ready for him.”

“Briggs!” she thought, with surprise. Briggs was a valet who dated from Leland’s pre-Socialist days. Pamela wondered how her father was going to afford Briggs, and had an instant’s dismayed speculation. But, no, it was impossible that he should be returning to Arlington Street, or to any address that should eventually lead there. It was impossible.

So it was. At once, for Leland, may be said as much as that. If there had ever been any

chance, ever the faintest likelihood down the years which make so many fantastic contingencies actual, Mary's letter gave it wings with which it flew straight to perdition. Leland had laughed consumedly at Mary's letter, and had put it in his pocket long enough to show to Lady Flora Bellamy, who also laughed, since he desired her to, but with not quite so sure a ring. She made no comment beyond her uncertain laugh, and Leland invited none. It was a touch of comedy of which his view was more precise than hers.

Leland laughed consumedly; but his amusement, like his daughter's, would often cover a deeper thing. His campaign had left its trace in him as a dreg of strychnine, after a tonic containing it, may linger in the body. He had been for the last three months a very important person, the centre of a very complicated web of human activities; he had heard much adulation of himself, had come to expect and believe a great deal of himself. A vanity tingled in him that might have been thought atrophied long ago. He held himself straighter and looked at the world with more assurance. The supposition of Mary's letter stirred him, when he had done laughing, to intense anger. He saw her supposition shared by the public, and realised this to the very expression on the face of the flunkey who would hang up his hat the day he returned to his wife's house.

No, not that. What, then? Something the hour demanded of him, some assertion, some

reply. Mere acceptance of what had happened was not to be thought of.

Among the successes of his adopted party his failure had begun to grow conspicuous. His candidature, in the back rush of talk which turned with the final results from the Hebrides, stood out interesting and unusual. Inevitably it became a matter for speculative paragraphs. Some of the paragraphs were in better taste than others.

And with a mordant appetite poor Leland devoured them all. He had never been one to excuse his palate any flavour that life offered it. He extracted the last bitterness and looked about him, not for apology or justification, but for some definite and unmistakable affront to the society that had lent itself to his predicament. His resources were limited, but he found one thing that he could do, and he did it.

"Mr. Pargeter's 'andwriting, miss," said Harriet, the privileged, later in the day. "I know it as well as I know me own, and better, for I never write the same twice running."

The knockers of Pembroke Mansions were still resounding to the second afternoon post, and Emmett, in his basement flat, was expressing himself to Mrs. Emmett, as he did several times daily, as to the legality of his being obliged to take the postman "up." Emmett had always desired the company to carry this point to the courts, and in spite of the weight of Emmett's representations the company never would.

Pamela took the letter. Briggs had come and

gone, and Harriet had found him very "close." The only thing she had discovered was that Briggs had been taken on "temporary," very temporary, since it transpired that he was there only to pack his master's clothes and to take them, by noon, to a certain station in the north of London. He supposed he would be paid for that ; more was none of his business. Pamela reflected when Harriet told her, that it would not, then, be the Riviera ; and this was satisfactory as Leland was not really in funds for the south of France. She put the letter down while she moved a writing-table. She and Harriet had been spending the last hour or two in arranging the furniture of the odd room so as to make it more comfortable for Leland's occupation. The chief feature of the odd room was the green and purple tiled fireplace designed in art nouveau. It had a window in the extreme corner, and none of the walls were parallel, being cut, as Harriet often said, like a piece of cheese. She must have meant a neat piece of cheese. Nevertheless, Pamela, looking at it when they had done their best, said, " No, Harriet. Papa won't stay long there. He couldn't."

The table adjusted, when she was quite sure they had done their best, Pamela opened the letter and read it. She read it without moving, except to turn the page. Harriet hung about hoping for a communication, but got none. Instead, Miss Pargeter went into her bedroom without a word, and shut the door. There she read the letter again before she let herself think

of it, though she had understood it perfectly the first time. It was not a long letter, and the only hint of deprecation or apology it contained was conveyed in the sentence that told her he would rather not have written it. But it had to be written, to the comrade more insistently perhaps than to the daughter, to the friend above all who had looked for so long, with such understanding eyes, upon his plight in life. What he had to tell her was that he had found at last courage to end his plight in life—no, not by anything so vulgar as what was known to the newspapers as his “own hand,” but by means that he hoped would be as definite and less experimental. Pamela could see her father’s smile at his own expense as he wrote that. The means were indicated in two lines; he was sailing for America that day in the *Caronia*, and he was not sailing alone.

“I have reason to believe,” he wrote, “that this step will be effective, perhaps an illusory hope, but, as you know, drowning men catch at straws. And I feel justified in taking it on other grounds. The convention of marriage, when it is only that, is the most refined cruelty civilisation has learned to impose, and a farce at which I feel I have assisted too long. There are those who can sustain it; but me it has crushed—finished. It has cost me my power to cope with life, or to be of use in the world. My gifts, such as they were, have followed my self-respect. This that I am doing is hardly more than a clutch at my identity.”

The letter revealed even more to his daughter than Pargeter intended or would have desired—revealed much, no doubt, that he did not see himself. For a moment she had to fight and push away what she saw, the ugly vision of her father's calculated acceptance of the thing he wanted at the expense of a woman to whom he could give—Pamela knew—so little in return. The shame of that burned in her cheeks, and she glanced hurriedly at her watch. The *Caronia* had sailed an hour ago. There was nothing to do.

She did not sob and cry ; but her heart under its new burden made a weight in her bosom, bruised and numb, that was her way of grieving. She sat, while a grave anger rose in her, looking, looking, at the wreck of her father's life, now, she told herself, quite accomplished. Her vision of it was complete enough ; but whatever else she saw, it did not show Leland to her less pitiable, or Mary more excusable. Mary—Mary and her money—she could almost think of her as monstrous. Mary and her goodness—yes, abnormal, colossal, inhuman—putting her hand at last to the intolerable public insult which had maddened her husband to this final ignominy. Mary and her power, to send one man over the precipice to ruin, to lift another—The thought came darting in like a javelin.

With its sharp thrust she realised that chances, long heavy and threatening, had come to a sudden crisis with her father's action. Pamela

had no need to be told with whom Leland was embarking that day at Liverpool, no need to examine the straw at which he professed himself catching. It was a very substantial straw—a raft, indeed, which might well float him into freedom, and Mary necessarily into freedom, too. Mary, in the silent appeal of another woman's dishonour, a woman who had sat at her feet and asked always her help and protection, would no longer, could no longer refuse. Nor should she, cried Pamela, in sudden passion, starting to her feet. No longer, no longer should she brood like some intolerable fate over the sun of every day and the stars of every night. A course should be thrust upon her, the simple course, the right course. And after they should all, at least, be in the light, in the open together. It was time to make an end of this crawling shadow of uncertainty, and to let what would be come to pass. Acourt and she should be forced to their decision, and Pamela herself would drive them on. Her stepmother should profit to the full by all her shining advantages, should be deprived without mercy of that atrocious, self-denying ordinance by which she held them but more temptingly out of reach. Pamela would so put it to her, could so put it to her, on Leland's letter, that she would have no alternative. Pamela felt an unbounded right to make this demand. It burned in all her veins. Leland Pargeter's daughter should make it sternly on his behalf; and the girl that loved Percy Acourt—remanded in this matter, quite to

the second place—would hail the event whatever it was ; it would mean an end. These thoughts went very quickly, but very clearly and precisely through her mind as she put on her out-of-door things, and, with a word to Harriet, let herself out.

At the door she hesitated about a cab ; but High Pollard had left her poor, even to shillings, and she got upon a motor omnibus in High Street instead. There was a bitter wind that swept a gritty winter dust before it ; but to Pamela the day might have been June, so high her heart was beating. She felt like destiny incarnate, and planned what she would say. She did not propose to reproach her stepmother. Besides, if her father's act did not carry its own reproach, what could anybody do with words ? She hardly felt the sword in her hands. She was quite willing to leave their incompatibility alone. But she would insist—oh, yes, she would insist—upon the point of duty, now that it stood undeniable, and clearer with every mile the *Caronia* was putting between her father and England. Since she was so sure—the whole was there—that Mrs. Pargeter *would* see the point of duty, Pamela's concern must have been that she should see it quickly and should act on it promptly ; Pamela's concern must have been indeed, with her own heart, and what it was to face. Her heart, blinded in submission so long, now tore rebelliously at its bandages, daring and demanding the worst. And she—it is not strange

—was for that moment as blind as her heart. As the moments passed, and the omnibus hurried heavily along Knightsbridge, her emotion gathered upon the wrong to Leland. Fiercely she gave the phrases of his letter the freedom of her mind as she turned into Arlington Street. Her hot heart said, and Pamela agreed, that it throbbed only for her father.

And on the first of the steps outside Mrs. Pargeter's house stood Percy Acourt. The door had just closed upon him; he seemed to have paused to shake his overcoat into place at the back of his neck. His face had a look of disturbance and was colourless. As Pamela came up the steps she saw a heavy flush pass into it, rather in response to some idea that she evoked than to her; and he lifted his hat formally without a word as he passed her. She remembered afterward that she herself had made no sign. It was as if some implicit forbidding held them both. He looked shaken to some fundamental depth, and, as she was so often to remember afterwards, quite dreadfully disconcerted. Pamela, whose startled eyes followed his retreat for an instant, saw that he squared and straightened his shoulders as he went. It was a movement which reminded her—afterward—curiously of her father. But these things were not present with her as she stood on her stepmother's doorstep. All that she was aware of then was his coincidence there, so amazingly—she did not stop to reason—so intolerably soon after the shock of Leland's action. It was as if

she saw gulfs yawning nearer than she thought, and she spurred herself to the plunge.

She had not yet been admitted when a taxicab drove up and a gentleman got out whose clean-shaven face bore the imprint of many and important affairs, under a silk hat worn with a slightly careless cant to the rear. He had a humorous expression calculated to put all the world at its ease, and a shrewd grey eye which knew Pamela at a glance ; and the breast-pocket of his well-cut coat bulged a little. He waited a step or two lower down, and they went in together.

"Er—Mr. Knowles," said the gentleman, with immense discretion, at the foot of the staircase.

"Mrs. Pargeter is expecting you, sir," the footman told him, but took them both to the drawing-room. There, a moment later, he reappeared.

"Will you please come to the morning-room, miss?" And to Mr. Knowles, "Mrs. Pargeter will see you in a few minutes, sir"—handing him the *Times*, as it were, in the same sentence.

Mary was sitting at her desk. Even across her stepdaughter's mind struck the impression of how drawn she looked, and exhausted.

"Dear Pamela," she said, "I am very glad to see you again at last." But she did not leave her chair or even hold out her hand. She looked, turning her eyes elsewhere, as if it grieved her that she could not.

“Do come to the fire,” she added. “It is bitter weather.”

“Thank you,” Pamela replied. “Yes, it is bitter weather.”

She sat, mechanically turning her hands to the glow, struggling with her sudden impression of the extraordinary grave change that had been worked in Mary during the past three months. It interfered with everything, Pamela’s perception of that change. It threw her suddenly back upon her whole scheme of attack. She would have to be gentle—firm, but gentle, quite unexpectedly gentle. She would be dealing with something other than the remarkable human equation, beautiful, accomplishing, but opaque and a little irritating, that she had known so long. The equation had slipped away, and left only the woman, with thin hands and a streak of grey in the hair on one side of her forehead, and sharper features, about which shadows seemed to flit. The woman Mary, whose face, in Pamela’s nice judgment, could never hold a shadow.

Here certainly was no triumph, but rather abasement, no calm dictator, but something timid and shaken. . . .

“Are you quite well, Madre ? ”

“Quite as usual, dear, thank you. Do I look ill ? ”

“You do not look altogether yourself.”

“I daresay. It has been rather a time of *Sturm und Drang*, has it not, for all of us ? Sir Henry has ordered me abroad. I go to Sicily next week.”

"Yes," said Pamela, "it has been a bad time."

How like her stepmother to talk of *Sturm und Drang* at a moment like this—a moment of real chaos. No, she had not changed with her envelope—how could she? She wasn't well, but she would still have a platitude for every situation; it was no sin to feel impatience with her; it never had been a sin.

"Sicily should be restful. I have come to speak to you about a very serious matter, Madre."

Mrs. Pargeter lifted her eyes. Pamela thought for an instant that she looked frightened. Certainly her voice was unsure.

"Yes, dear."

"Our relations have never been very happy, have they?"

"Oh——"

"I don't mean for the moment yours and mine. I mean our relations as a family, including papa."

"You can hardly regret that, I think, more than I do."

"It is—I am afraid—pure farce to talk of regretting. We must speak plainly. I do not wish to say anything to hurt your feelings, but you must have realised long ago that his marriage was a mistake."

It was the language of upheaval, that cast everything at last to the winds; but Mary had nothing for it but a tired acceptance.

"I have sometimes thought that mine was not altogether fortunate, Pamela,"

“ Oh, I grant that ! But for you it was apparently fortunate enough to go on with, though I know—all the world knows—that you might have ended it long ago. He asked nothing better than escape—nothing more than escape. But you turned your terrible moral key upon him ; you did not want any change in your establishment. You still have your father’s butler ; it would be even less to your liking to dismiss a husband.”

Her voice changed its key, and Mary, without looking at her, lifted a hand ; but Pamela rushed on.

“ Well, now you must dismiss him. You have no longer any choice. He bore his life—I am sorry, but I must say it—he bore his life till you made him ridiculous ; and now he has branded himself to-day. He has committed a social offence of which all the world must know. He has gone with Flora Bellamy to America ; and I have come to tell you of it, and to demand that this last humiliating step of his shall not be taken in vain.”

Pamela paused. Mrs. Pargeter was looking at her with a curious expression, almost subtle and almost smiling.

“ I am sorry you have given yourself that trouble,” she said. “ It has brought you out in very disagreeable weather, and it was quite unnecessary.”

Was Mary attempting irony ? Had the milk curdled at last ?

“ Unnecessary ? ”

“Entirely. I had all the information you are good enough to bring me by the first post this morning, and I have already decided upon my course of action.”

Pamela glanced at the desk; but the pathetic letter which Flora Bellamy had so much enjoyed writing, in which she conveyed to Mrs. Pargeter that the imaginary ground of their last interview was now solid and irreparable, was in Mr. Knowles’s congested breast-pocket in the drawing-room.

“Oh, yes! I shall divorce your poor father, Pamela. It is plain that I must.”

Was it, then, to be as easy as that? Pamela felt that her stepmother, in this quiet, ready acquiescence, was playing her something like a trick. It was not even acquiescence; she had not waited to be asked. She felt the ground cut from under her feet—why, then, indeed, was she here!

“Papa wrote,” she exclaimed; but Mary’s eyes indicated that she did not propose to answer that. Perhaps someone else had written, thought Pamela, perhaps detectives had been used; but what did it matter? Then the thing with which her heart had been mute and benumbed since she met Acourt at the door, rushed up and took possession of her. Percy had already been sent for! She stopped, I fear, poor Pamela, to consider no probability of decency or taste; the thing was too sorely familiar to her to present delays of that sort to her imagination. Mary’s freedom and what they might make of it—what

else could fill the whole landscape of her life and Percy's? What else could explain his face as he passed, and his silence, the silence of another man, thwarted, tempted, and seduced by the power of Mary Pargeter's money?

Pamela's small features contracted to harder drawing and finer lines. She picked up her muff and drew herself together to leave her chair.

"I see you have already had the advantage of consultation with Captain Acourt," she said, as if something in her pressed a quick and irresistible trigger.

It was clumsy, obvious, in every way deplorable. Nothing but the sharpness at the girl's breast could excuse it. Mary, chilled and repelled by the implication, remembered the sharpness just in time.

"Dear Pamela! Yes, I have told Percy what I intend to do. He happened to come in a little while ago to consult me about his own affairs. He is very depressed about Blackport—one cannot wonder."

"Then it is all settled." Pamela's smile, at least, was delicate.

There was still the rag of a chance to misunderstand; and Mrs. Pargeter took it.

"Not quite. But I have sent for my solicitor, and I expect him to tell me that there will be very little difficulty in arranging that everything shall be for your father as you and he have so long wished it."

"Yes," said Pamela, rising, "I do not apolo-

gise. I *have* long wished it. And now—congratulations.”

Mary kept her seat, playing with a pen to hide the trembling of her fingers; but she sent Pamela a glance of singular clearness.

“Then let *me* apologise,” she said. “I ought, perhaps, as you say, to have taken this step long ago. I now fear that I was wrong in not doing so. You are so deeply interested that it is right that you should know the reason I did not take it.”

“It is never too late,” said Pamela, with a laugh, “to mend.”

Mary hesitated at that, and looked at the pen in her fingers. Pamela stood waiting. Her eyes were fixed upon her stepmother, as if the intensity of her look had some compensation in it for the bitter riot in her breast. She felt her self-respect somehow established by that clear-sighted gaze. It was something to read the creature who was injuring her so plainly; and a little smile that pinned all together sat on her lips. She moved toward the door. Then Mrs. Pargeter made the last, and the most real, of her generosities.

“Wait, Pamela,” she said. . . . “Wait. This is a little difficult to tell you——”

“Oh no,” Pamela retorted, “don’t make—don’t make any *more* difficulties, Madre.”

Again Mary did not look up.

“I am afraid you are entitled to say that. I have been very stupid, and you always how clever! Still, don’t sneer, Pam——”

"I am entitled to nothing—from you—and I accept nothing," her stepdaughter replied; but again Mary said "Wait——"

"I must tell you. The reason was"—the words came very slowly—"that as a free woman I, in my peculiar position, would be subject to certain temptations. One of these you will be able easily to conceive. It is that of accepting marriage again—possibly on the same terms, and with the same result. I might even be tempted, in my unhappy circumstances, to marry a man who had not only no love for me, but whose affections"—she kept on steadily—"were very deeply committed elsewhere."

The room went round; Pamela put a hand to the door. "And now?" she stammered. She seemed to hurry, to be only half understanding. She caught, in her shipwreck, at a rope to which she clung, blinded and deafened, with her "And now?"

"Now I am no longer likely to make that mistake," said Mary quickly. "Besides, I have now no alternative. May I ask you to ring?"

Pamela crossed the room to the wall, while her mind grasped in vain at words that would help her over a sudden great gulf that seemed to open between herself and Mary. She stood there against the wall, on her side of the gulf, in safety, and threw helpless looks across it, but Mary had not looked up again; there was no foothold on the other side.

"If there is nothing more, dear," said Mrs.

Pargeter after a moment, "will you forgive me if I send you away? Mr. Knowles has already been waiting, I am afraid, longer than he should."

"I am very sorry!" faltered Pamela, and went. "I am very sorry," she said dully to herself, as she went down the staircase, humbled, ashamed, dismissed. Her words were quite meaningless; she could not have explained why she was very sorry; but it was all she could find to say. Suddenly, on the brink of desperate tears, she turned and ran up the stairs, flight after flight, to the little north room on the third floor that had been her father's. There she locked the door, and in Leland's dismantled sanctuary wept herself into quiet.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE *Coronia*, as a rule, published her daily newspaper about lunch time, and Pargeter was among the passengers who missed and enquired for it when, a day out of New York, for reasons connected with the weather and the transmission, the *Bulletin* became for once an evening paper. Leland found himself already very dependent upon the centres of vitality he had left; he sought eagerly in the *Bulletin* for fillips to the monotony of the voyage. He took the issue eagerly from the hand of the steward, and dropped to read it upon a sofa at the top of the saloon companion, while he awaited Lady Flora's appearance for dinner. And the first thing he saw in it, with startling distinctness, was his own name. Plain as was the print it danced for an instant indistinguishably before his eyes. He had not counted on any immediate scandal. He and Lady Flora, who never troubled to read the marconigrams, had decided against any simple course as likely to be annoying on the other side. They had both heard of American reporters. So Flora once again had recourse to her useful grandmothers, and was travelling as Mrs. Bruce Forrester. Later, when it all came out, the grandmothers would serve at least to remind people who she was and what she was.

Pargeter was travelling under his own name, but he had no reason to suppose it would come flying after him. He put up his glasses and got hold of it again. Then he once more perceived that his name was of public significance only by virtue of the prefix that made it his wife's.

"London, 27th.

"Hon. Mrs. Leland Pargeter, distinguished philanthropist and sole representative of celebrated banking house of Lossel, died suddenly to-day of heart trouble."

The dinner bugle had not yet gone, and the ship was, besides, rather an empty one. Nobody passed but a steward. Then, at a familiar swish of skirts, he turned quickly to find Lady Flora.

Ah—Lady Flora. She brought with her a host of considerations, but first she would have to be told. How would she take it? With hysterics! He must get it over in private. He looked at her oddly for an instant.

"Really, Flora," he told her, "you have put on too much to-night." Then, before she could reply, "Come, I must get out of this. Come with me to my cabin, or to yours. I have something to tell you."

"Impossible, dearest. Christine is there, and as to yours, you know we agreed——"

"Never mind what we agreed. Come on deck, then."

"It's freezing. Oh, Leland, is anything wrong? Where is your cabin? Let us go there, then. I don't really mind."

They slipped along the passage together, and

Pargeter almost pushed her in and shut the door. He had just dressed ; he made a hurried clutch at various garments, and threw them into the wardrobe.

“ I’m sorry to be so untidy, but Mary’s dead.”

Flora sank down upon the unoccupied berth that made a sofa.

“ Leland, I *am* sorry ! ”

Pargeter stood contemplating her.

“ I suppose it’s a public misfortune,” he said.

“ *Poor* Mrs. Pargeter ! ” escaped Flora.

“ What of ? ”

“ The marconigram says heart trouble. She has had weakness of that sort for years, but it was always believed to be quite manageable.”

“ Do you suppose,” said Flora, with a sudden frightened glance, “ that it had anything to do with you and me ? ”

“ There is no reason to think that she knew. She almost certainly didn’t. Nobody knew but Pamela, and she would say nothing ; they’re not on terms. I’ve been thinking whether she could have—known. She was the last person to be reached by winds of gossip, even if there was any surmise. It’s lucky that we decided against telling anybody except Pam. I was very tempted to answer that letter of Mary’s, the one I showed you. I am glad now I didn’t. It would inevitably have been connected—though in the circumstances there would hardly be an inquest——”

Flora’s fingers flew to her ears, and she gave a little scream.

"What a ghastly suggestion! I was tempted too, but it *is* a good thing neither of us wrote! A shock like that, poor darling! I *was* devoted to her, Leland! I can't tell you what it is to me to think I shall never see her again. I *was* so looking forward to making her forgive me."

"We are in to-morrow," said Pargeter. "I will wire, and return, of course, at once."

"Of course," said Flora, rather blankly. "So will I."

"My dear child, what in the world for? Certainly not; don't dream of it. You must stay quietly in New York, and I will rejoin you there when—when I can."

"You won't be long, Leland?"

"No longer than I can help. There will be, of course, a great deal to settle. I haven't an idea——"

He pulled himself together, throwing back his shoulders with the old gesture, and involuntarily his eye sought the glass of his dressing stand.

"She had absolutely no near relative," he said. "And now, Flora, you must go as usual to dinner. You may speak of it, if you like. Yes, you had better speak of it. My wife was, in a sense, your very dear friend; it would be unnatural not to speak of it. After all, we have been a good deal in each other's pockets. I will not, of course, appear."

"Oh, Leland, must I? I would so much rather have something quietly with you here," begged Flora; but Pargeter's fingers were on the door handle. Before he turned it a knock came,

and he opened it narrowly, to disclose the coat sleeve of a steward and a folded paper.

"Beg pardon, sir, but the captain wished this to be given to you immediately."

Pargeter took the sheet and closed the door. His identity as the distinguished widower had been discovered. It was another marconigram.

"King and Queen have expressed deep regret death Hon. Mrs. Pargeter, which supposed some quarters been hastened by events connected with Mr. Leland Pargeter's candidature recent election. Place of interment not yet settled, but understood public funeral will be accorded deceased lady whom evening papers all shades opinion unite eulogising."

"Very civil of the captain," said Leland. "Odd misunderstanding. Now, Flora, if you will slip quietly out, I'll ring."

"A public funeral!" murmured Flora as she slipped out. "How nice for her, poor dear. *Quel succès, enfin!* I am glad!"

Leland, left alone, read the message and re-read it, with an expression as unmoved as if it had been a market report. He sat there, with his prison walls in ruins about him, but little invigorated, to all appearance, by the fresh air. Heavy and bald he sat, with a figure definitely crumpled across the waistcoat, and not a vine-leaf stirred in what was left of his hair. Everything had come to pass; his world was changed, his freedom invited him; and he wondered at his own impassivity.

"Is it only decency," he said to himself, "that

keeps me from dancing a hornpipe on the deck, or is it that this has happened so—damnably—late ? ”

Then he rang for the steward ; and for all his depreciation of his good fortune, there was a new importance in his voice as he ordered his dinner.

CHAPTER XXXII

SO the space across which Pamela once saw her stepmother sitting with her elbow on her desk, and shaded, averted eyes, never closed at all, but widened till the picture of her there hung at last like a mirage on the further side. Pamela that afternoon went back to her flat. Mary turned quietly to her solicitor.

Mr. Knowles spent most of the next three days with her ; but her wishes and dispositions were so clear that, though they involved some unusual provisions—and he found himself obliged to consult counsel on quite half a dozen points—he was able to place the very important document that issued from them before her for signature on the fourth. It was working at high pressure, and Mr. Knowles had himself been ordered by a peremptory doctor to the sea ; but as he was the single member of the firm perfectly familiar with Lossel affairs, and Mrs. Pargeter seemed anxious to complete at the earliest possible instant, Mr. Knowles postponed leaving town till this was done. The suit for divorce was, of course, a simple matter ; the heavy and complicated business was his client's testamentary action consequent upon her deter-

mination to bring the suit. That, Mr. Knowles confessed in speaking of it afterwards, very nearly floored him; he had never been so pushed. The enormously satisfactory thing was that he had been pushed to such wonderful time. It was almost as if his client had waited to complete.

She did not wait much longer. Elizabeth, who had been sleeping in Mrs. Pargeter's dressing-room for some nights with the door open between, awakened by the sound of difficult breathing, ran to her mistress and then to the telephone, and Sir Henry was there with extraordinary quickness. Almost his first words were "Where is your master?" Elizabeth was obliged to confess, with a sense of criminal inculcation, that she did not know; but Miss Pargeter was on the telephone. She was then given a message for Miss Pargeter, which was taken out of her mouth by the second footman, half-way up the stairs, and looking oddly like everybody else in shirt sleeves. They "got" Miss Pargeter, too, very quickly, but it had hardly reached her ear when another of the white-faced household brought word that its character must be changed.

Sir Henry and Elizabeth were with her. Only Sir Henry and Elizabeth; but she did not know, and if she had known, it would have added no bitterness to her passing. Distinction and dependence had always surrounded her; nothing warmer, simpler, more happy or more human had ever stood beside her pillow. And she who

had been alone so long would never have discovered it so late.

Then came Pamela back to stay with the beautiful shell of her for the little while that was left. Pamela, very stilled in spirit, passionately humbled at heart, thankful for the great inrush of adulation and regret from a startled nation, that seemed to lift and bear Mary Pargeter's personality so far upon the way toward that withdrawn company whose names their world would not willingly forget. Pamela read letters and telegrams and saw the people that had to be seen, and gathered what the newspapers said, with a feeling of helping to speed her there. Poor Pamela! She was routed quite, for this enemy had laid down her arms in love, had even pointed to the last low place as if to say, "There you may put your foot upon my head." She came back to that, and the thought of her father—a thought with a new illogical thorn in it.

Pamela came back. There was no one else to come, except Leland, nobody, as Elizabeth said, "belonging to her," unless Percy Acourt belonged to her; and he had made that more than ever problematical by going, a few days before, to the Italian Riviera. It was clear, now in the end, that the place of people belonging to her had been taken by movements and institutions—the *Times*, the Government, the Embassies, the Throne even. And these mourned in their manner, and stretched out hands of farewell.

She must rest in the Abbey; there was not a dissentient voice. It was known—the *Times*,

at all events, had reason to believe—that Mrs. Pargeter's benefactions to the State would be found to be “considerably beyond” what the Exchequer might have already computed in death duties ; but it was for the high and shining example of her life as the trustee and administratrix of one of the largest private fortunes of modern times, rather than for any material gain from her lamented decease, that the nation desired to show gratitude by the most notable honour in its power to bestow. The Dean had readily given his consent. “A good woman,” he said to an enquirer, “is the noblest work of God, and Mary Pargeter was not only a good, but a great woman.” A Dean must be allowed his margins ; but there were many who agreed that he had not overstepped them.

Then the report found publication that Mrs. Pargeter's will carried directions for burial beside her father in the little churchyard in the Hareham estate. It was remembered that the churchyard had been enclosed and consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury for the purpose of receiving Lord Lossel's body, at his request ; and this gave colour to the rumour as to his daughter's wishes. The matter had to be set at rest by reference to Mrs. Pargeter's solicitors ; and no doubt it was thus that the general nature of her testament became known to a few persons rather sooner than would ordinarily have been the case. One of these persons was the Dean himself, who had to be satisfied ; others were Captain Percy Acourt, who was so nearly and so

unusually concerned, and Miss Pargeter, who was present at the informal opening of the document. Percy learned it the same day from his old school friend Hallington Knowles, whose brother, Harcourt Knowles, had been Solicitor-General in Calthorpe's last administration, and who ventured to be the first, perhaps a little prematurely, to send his congratulations.

Percy and Pamela had thus at least the opportunity of thinking separately of what she had done, while the preparations for a State funeral went forward, and the newspapers published the fact that Mr. Leland Pargeter was already on his way across the Atlantic, having barely landed at New York, and the world wagged on as usual, and Mary lay in the winter of her abdication, and seemed well content.

It is difficult, perhaps, to feel as content as she under any other conditions ; certainly the satisfactions she imposed upon Percy Acourt were uneasy ones to live with, for more than one reason. She had simply removed herself from his perplexities, having taken precaution to leave the situation that had so tempted him as fully at his disposal as ever he could have seen it. Indeed, far more fully, since it is hard to suppose that Mary could have wiped herself entirely out of it in any other way than the one in which she had so happily only to acquiesce. (Gertrude Ambrose's sombre theory that she did more than that we may dismiss, knowing Mrs. Ambrose as we do, and with more direct access to the facts than even she could profess.) Mary was gone by the

dark and lonely path, and her last act had been to put Percy Acourt in her place as she conceived her place ; and this, it will be quickly seen, was more convenient than being beside her, in that it left room for another. He might think of that too, at his ease, while he pondered his new responsibilities and reflected upon how they came to be his.

He would have to ponder them. Mary's hand, even cold, offered no benefit free from the need of reflection. This one held for poor Percy a whole world of ambiguity ; but Hallington Knowles had assured her that the way devised was the only way. She could enforce, effectively, no private views upon public policy ; and she knew her time was short. Perhaps, too, her failing eye saw less of politics, and more of Percy and the common good—she had, after all, no great discipline as a party woman. This, at all events, was what he had in the end to take from her.

Under all necessary safeguards and checks, including the appointment of three Governors, to be chosen by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mrs. Pargeter's will made Captain Acourt sole administrator of her vast fortune for the benefit of the State in agriculture, with a provision of five thousand pounds a year to enable him to undertake the duty without the embarrassment of private claims upon his time. At his death, again under those admirable conditions which had done so much to floor Mr. Knowles, the whole fabric and accumulation of

the house of Lossel was to become a public inheritance, passing directly into the charge of the Treasury, to be administered under the name of the Lossel Fund for the Assistance of Agriculture, as a national asset in perpetuity. There were the usual legacies to servants. Parkinson, who had exhibited such exemplary fidelity to other members of the household, was made very comfortable; and several institutions in which Mary's interest had long been personal and special received bequests. There was also a careful provision for Hareham Park, which was to be converted at once into a retreat at the disposal of authors upon the Civil List, toward whom Mary had long considered the country's gratitude slender. She may have thought with pleasure that the spark of depressed genius might often re-illuminate itself there, fanned by contact with the achievement, very late in life, of her great grandfather, Lord Lossel.

To Pamela she left no money, but all her personalty in token of her "unbroken affection," her pearls as well as her place; and Leland Pargeter received what Mrs. Ambrose described as a "compassionate allowance" of a thousand pounds a year—to be allowed, if undrawn, to accumulate on his behalf.

As somebody said with chastened gratitude in the next Sunday's *Constitution*—probably not Norreys, whose phrases had begun to be current coin among the staff—it was a will which gave a startled and interested nation "furiously to think." Admitting this, what

shall we say of the burden it placed upon that promising Unionist politician, Captain Percy Acourt? One can only reflect, for comfort, upon the aptitude for balancing such matters which was so markedly his. The dinner-table word was put as cleverly by Gertrude Ambrose as by anybody.

“A bank manager,” she exclaimed, “to the intention, for the next five years anyhow, of Ashley Venn! And it has been left to a woman without any sense of humour whatever, to make this incomparable jest!”

It had certainly a look of that. If, as Ashley Venn himself commented, it had been anybody but Mary Pargeter——

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On one day people were admitted, and the house murmured for hours to muffled feet and the quiet opening and closing of doors. Early that morning there were matters to decide in the room which Mary still occupied at some advantage. A Red Cross wreath had come—and what place should be given to the one from the German Emperor? Pamela had arranged these tributes as seemed fitting, and was standing for a moment in the transformed place, as she had already stood so often, beside the coffin, which had not yet wholly closed upon the simple riddle that had been Mary Pargeter. She stood there with her ineffectual hand on the polished wood, seeking, as we do, the withdrawn soul in the face that would never yield it to her again,

trying, as we do, to penetrate the shut lids with her passion of living regret. She did not look up for the step in the room—a servant had been there the moment before—even when it advanced; and it was only after he had stood on the edge of her consciousness for some seconds that she raised her eyes and found herself face to face with Percy Acourt.

They took silent refuge in her lying there; they hid themselves from one another in her beautiful, austere indifference. If she had wished to triumph over them she might have been indeed gratified; but that was little likely, and they knew it. Moments passed as they stood beside her, pressing their hearts upon the sword of the rebuke she would have spared them; and when at last their eyes strangely met it was to accuse and deny all that they had ever said, in vain sacrifice to her peace. When finally they left her they seemed to take unwilling steps towards the future to which she dismissed them, the future which her simple departure had made so certain, and yet so ambiguous. They passed into it together, through the door which Acourt held ceremoniously open. They passed into it together. After all, it was only for her, not for them, to refuse.

About six months later that kindly soul, Hallington Knowles, secured permission to return to Lady Flora Bellamy a certain incriminating letter for which there was now no crime that could usefully be established. On the con-

trary, it was a letter that had importantly contributed to the public welfare. So that Leland, who married—without indecent haste—the lady who probably cost him an election and certainly lost him a great deal of money, was never to realise either the one misfortune or the other. It may be that this oblivion added to the serenity of the married life in which he so soon grew noticeably stout and opinionated. It was a complete and happy ignorance which his daughter Pamela, who knew just a little, might have envied him. Mrs. Percy Acourt knew just a little, and she could never ask the whole, of what her husband had said to her father's wife, and what he had heard in reply, that bitter day of her encounter with him on the doorstep in Arlington Street. She waited hoping to be told ; she will always wait hoping to be told ; and as that brilliant specialist in British agricultural finance never will tell her, she will continue, I fear, to imagine the worst.

THE END

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In his "LIFE OF CESARE BORGIA" Mr. Sabatini gives us a stern, straightforward narrative, together with an analysis of the chronicles and writings upon which the history of the Borgias—and more particularly of Cesare—is founded. He has reserved it for the present volume to fill in the details permissible to the romancer, and to allow his fancy to play about the same fascinating and terrible protagonist, presenting to us the real Cesare Borgia, as Mr. Sabatini visualises him, but in settings purely artificial and in circumstances wholly or partly fictitious, spun and woven with all the art of which this writer is master.

It is the Author's contention—and he may claim to have established it in his "LIFE OF CESARE BORGIA"—that terrible and relentless as Cesare was, he was pre-eminently just with that dread justice that took no concern of mercy. In "THE JUSTICE OF THE DUKE" we see this beautiful and amazing young Italian of the Renaissance dealing with the situations which the Author has invented or built-up, precisely as Mr. Sabatini conceives that he would have dealt with them had they arisen as set down in this work. Thus, whilst purely a work of fiction, fine, sharp-cut and arresting, it is none the less of high historic value by virtue of the series of accurate and graphic pictures it shows us of a ruthless man in a ruthless age. As a corollary to "THE LIFE OF CESARE BORGIA," and as an illustration of it, nothing could be more welcome to Mr. Sabatini's readers.

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ARABELLA KENEALY

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Nerissa is a healthy, sweet and pretty English girl, who has led a luxurious life in her uncle's country home. She becomes bored, then Hartland, an ascetic East-end vicar, crosses her path, falls in love, and, against his principles—marries her. Nerissa, full of sweetness and charm, would have been his joy and consolation, but Hartland after a struggle, repulses her; she is not to be his real wife, only his companion and drudge. Nerissa is loyal. The daughter of an East-end Doctor, a girl of opulent charms, vulgar mind, and unstable temperament is converted by Hartland's preaching and is taken into the household. She attracts Hartland; this lure of the flesh is a temptation to the man leading an unnatural life. Nerissa is pained and shocked, and Hartland goes off and enters a Trappist monastery. After his death Nerissa marries again. The book is full of interest and cannot fail to repay perusal.

(January, 1912)

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Stella O'Donovan, a very poor but also very beautiful and quite unsophisticated Irish girl, lives in an old castle on a lovely but lonely Bay on the Irish coast. She has Spanish blood in her veins, and much of the impulsive and fascinating temperament of the Andalusians. Becoming heiress to a million of money, she decides to go to London and enter Society. Before her departure, a young Norwegian sculptor, Olaf Johansen, of striking appearance, comes to reside in the village. He at once falls in love with Stella, who returns his affection, but who, doubtful of herself, flees to London. Here she appears to meet Olaf again, but it is his twin brother impersonating him. Stella at once succumbs to his love-making, and many highly dramatic scenes follow.

Every Dog His Day.

HAROLD AVERY

Author of "A Week at the Sea," etc.

Basil Relaver and Angela kiss in a garden at Avesbury, youthful and innocent lovers. Circumstances divide them, Basil is whirled away into the vortex of commercial life and spends some years building up business and making himself a position. Prospering, he revisits Avesbury to learn from Helen Sutherly, Angela's aunt, that Angela, proud and independent, lives in London and earns her own livelihood as a secretary. They meet and misunderstand. Helen Sutherly intervenes, but the lovers are again about to part when they meet once more in the old garden and "love awakens and does not wake in vain." It is a pleasant, quiet story which grows in interest as it proceeds, and leaves a sense of satisfaction in the mind of the reader when it is finished.

The Long Hand.

SIR WILLIAM MAGNAY, BART.

Author of "Red Chancellor," "Count Zarka," and "A Prince of Lovers."

The setting of the story is Bavaria at the end of the 18th century, when that very remarkable, but now almost forgotten genius, Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford, was for a short time actually Regent of Bavaria, and was standing forth as the saviour of Munich, threatened at once by the French and Austrian armies. At this juncture a young English traveller arrives in that city, and by chance is drawn into a tragic adventure, being mistaken by an emissary of vengeance for a young officer who has given offence at Court, and whom the "long hand" of royalty is seeking to clutch. This episode proves to be but the first of many exciting adventures, and from it is developed a love interest which becomes the engrossing theme of the story. Readers who have enjoyed the Author's previous novels will find no falling off in this, his latest novel of the same genre, which offers a feast of romance and stirring adventure.

Exotic Martha.

DOROTHEA GERARD

Author of "The City of Enticement," "A Glorious Lie," etc.

Martha Grant, betrothed to a Dutchman whom she has met at an Alpine health resort, but who resides in Java, arrives at Batavia to find her lover married to another woman. Rather than face the humiliation of a return to her Scotch home she engages herself as a lady's maid to an invalid Dutchwoman. Suspected of poisoning her mistress, she is condemned to penal servitude for life. Effecting her escape, with the aid of an eccentric French doctor, who is the real, though unsuspected, poisoner, she is on the point of yielding to the advances of her rescuer, when George Pether, the friend of her girlhood, appears upon the scene, and in his company "exotic Martha"—quite cured of an ill-regulated passion for the tropics—regains her native land.

The Cardinal.

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Author of "A Son of the Emperor," "Across the Gulf," etc.

An historical story of Italian life in the 13th century, the time of the Guelphs and Ghibellines, when the Pope and Emperor with their factions were opposed. Ottaviano Maldini is the cardinal. He is all-powerful in Rome, and more of a soldier and a statesman than a churchman. Ariadne, the heroine, is a princess who is kidnapped and falls into the hands of the Moors. She is an exquisite little creature and her dancing uniquely beautiful, but she deliberately lames herself to escape harem life. She is offered as a slave to the cardinal, who out of pity buys her. With the cardinal she is happy, interest and affection develop into passionate love between them, and in the end Ariadne dies by her own hand, and relieves the cardinal of the embarrassment of her presence. It is an intensely interesting romance, and presents a lively and accurate picture of the times.

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CECIL ADAIR

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The Mercy of the Qualities is a girl who, having inherited property, is free from the necessity which often leads to marriage, for which she is temperamentally disinclined. Captain Dare, whose little kinsman Colin is Mercy's friend, has other views, but Mercy will have none of him, and in pique he marries Alys, a timid little friend of Mercy's, who runs away from him and is hidden by the vicar's wife. Mercy and Colin swear eternal friendship; the latter has no desire to marry and perpetuate the house of Dare. Dare is found dead, a victim of the vendetta. The wholesome story is full of interesting ingredients—Riches, High Place, lovely Country, Beautiful Weather, some Excitement, and Mystery.

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This is a present-day story of strong domestic interest. The problem which Mr. Douglas Sladen treats is the unhappiness inflicted by unsuitable marriages and the inconveniences which besiege those who defy the marriage convention and take their lives into their own hands.

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The book differs from most books which deal with the same subject in the fact that neither party, in spite of straitened means and social ostracism, exhibits any remorse or regret. They are completely satisfied with what they have done. They live a simple life and their love match is an unequivocal success. The unexpected dénouement of the story is a happy one.

Hodson's Voyage.

W. H. KOEBEL

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This is a work of light humour from the pen of Mr. W. H. Koebel, better known of recent years as a travel writer of distinction, but who in taking up fiction again is returning to his first love. The plot deals with the trials of a commercial traveller on board a liner. He is mistaken for a country officer whom he resembles, and the complications that ensue include a love interest, and give rise to a rapid series of situations that contain frank elements of farce, especially when the hero finds that fragments of the past history of his military prototype are known to others and not to himself. The climax of the story arises when it is imperative that he should reveal his identity, and when he finds it impossible to convince his companions that circumstances have compelled him to act the lie. The book abounds in situations, and much amusement arises from the bewildering happenings of the unexpected. The fate of the unfortunate victim hangs in the balance until the last page.

The Baron of Ill Fame.

HESTER BARTON

This story gives a faithful picture of Florence in the time of Dante. Besides Corso Donati, the hero of Campaldino, Dante and his wife; Giotto, the great artist; Giano della Bella, the popular demagogue, and other Florentines known to history, figure in the novel. The period dealt with was a stirring and brutal one, yet amid the clash of steel, the flow of blood, the hoarse yells of mutual hatred, the orgies of illicit passion, the violation of convents, the sacking and burning of towns, men and women plighted troth even as to-day, and the author of this romance of mediæval Florence has unified her graphic descriptions of historical incidents by a love story all the more idyllic because of the background of vice and crime.

Duckworth's Diamonds.

E. EVERETT-GREEN

Author of "Clive Lorimer's Marriage," "The Lady of the Bungalow," etc.

Duckworth has entrusted a haul of diamonds to his friend, Dermot Fitzgerald, who brings them to England to await instructions. He is aware that he is shadowed by one, Pike, and gets Hilton, a friend of his, to come over to Ireland and advise him. Hilton advises him to bring the treasure and hide it in his own caves of Treversal. This they do, though not without adventure. In a little village, close to Treversal, stands a small cottage to which Barbara Quentin has retired on the death of her millionaire father, whose assets appear to be nil, and whose child is unprovided for. She lives in the cottage with a friend, making acquaintance with Hilton and Dermot. Later on, Phyllis Duckworth is drawn into the web of fate, and comes also to the cottage. Letters come ostensibly from Duckworth, demanding the surrender of the treasure to his sister; but Phyllis deems these forgeries, and Dermot holds on. In the end and in the nick of time, Duckworth himself turns up; there is a raid upon the caves of Treversal, but the villains are caught and arrested, and various pairs of lovers are made happy.

A Passion in Morocco.

CHARLOTTE CAMERON

Author of "A Woman's Winter in South America."

The story opens on board a P. & O. steamer when it is ploughing its way steadily towards the Moroccan coast. A beautiful English girl, duly chaperoned, makes the acquaintance of a handsome Moorish prince who is returning to his native land after passing through the curriculum at Oxford, with the varied problems of East and West seeking solution in his mind. The presence of the girl presses one of these questions irresistibly to the forefront of his consideration. At Mazagan the ladies are invited by an officers' guide to visit the harem of the Kaid, where the beautiful English girl, separated from the party, is trapped by the wily owner, from whose hands she is duly rescued, at the eleventh hour, by Mohammed el Yumar, the Moorish Prince. Many adventures follow—amid strange scenes are enacted against a background of vivid Oriental colour, and in the end East and West effect a union, finding that "love levels all."

The Lotus Lantern.

MARY IMLAY TAYLOR

Author of "The Reaping," "The Impersonator," "My Lady Clancarty," etc.

A love story of great charm and dramatic power, whose scene is laid in Japan of to-day. Lieut. John Holland, a military attaché of the British Embassy, and betrothed to the daughter of the British Ambassador, while witnessing the Buddhist festival of lanterns, symbolizing ships of the souls of the dead, meets Umé-San, who had been sold by her relatives and had become a Geisha girl in a Tokyo tea garden. A plot has been formed to place her in the power of an unscrupulous and cruel Japanese prince. Holland's sympathy is first enlisted, and finally he falls passionately in love with the little Japanese girl, pure, sweet, and devout, notwithstanding her surroundings. The story moves with dramatic force, is filled with interest from the opening chapter to the end, and Umé (flower of the plum) is one of the tenderest and dearest heroines of fiction.

Damosel Croft.

R. MURRAY GILCHRIST

Author of "The Courtesy Dame," "The Two Goodwins," "The Firstborn," etc.

The heroine of this book is the last of a wealthy yeoman family in the High Peak Country; the hero is a young man from Yorkshire, of equal social standing but comparatively insignificant means. Janey Maskrey is beloved by three; her choice falls at last upon the most fitting suitor, with whom, without being aware of the fact, she has been in love for some considerable time. An author of distinguished reputation—akin to the Maskreys—presents with his curious entourage a remarkable contrast. Several old-world country-scenes, notably the Carrying of the Garland at Castleton, are presented with a wealth of colour. The book is full of sunlight, of happiness and of country mirth.

The Doll: A Happy Story.

VIOLET HUNT

Author of "White Rose of Weary Leaf," "The Wife of Altamount."

This is a story of a woman who, having been divorced once, and having lost control of her child, invents a stratagem by which, upon her re-marriage, she thinks she will be protected from a second loss of her child should she again be divorced. How the stratagem fails and how the first child that she had lost comes into her life again, and how in the end, though her stratagem has failed, she is successful all along the line owing to the employment of purely feminine weapons, it is the purpose of this novel to show.

A Prisoner in Paradise.

H. L. VAHEY

The scenes of this story are enacted in the Malay Islands and Singapore. A British agent, after years of residence on the South Sea Islands, pines for civilisation, and decides to quit. The appearance of a beautiful half-caste reconciles him to remaining. Complications with the natives arise, and flight becomes the only safety of the lovers. They fly by different routes, and the man arrives at Singapore, where the vessel carrying the woman is reported lost with all hands. The tie that bound him to the Malays thus broken, he seeks the solaces of civilisation by marrying a widow. Disillusioned, after two months he quarrels with the widow, and ships back to barbarism. Unexpectedly, he finds the Malay wife returned and awaiting him, and considers himself absolved from his recent unsuccessful marriage. The book is said to possess something of the glitter and colour of Conrad's tropical tales.

When Satan took Flesh.

A. J. ANDERSON

Author of "The Romance of Fra Filippo Lippi," etc.

In this story Satan takes flesh that he may plot a second Fall. By means of Clairvoyance he bargains for possession of a young man's body, and discovers in the doctrine of the limitation of the family a new and powerful temptation by which to wreck the human race. Mr. Anderson writes with sincerity of purpose and has a thorough knowledge of his subject, and his story is worthy of the careful attention of every thoughtful mind.

The Children of Alsace.

RENÉ BAZIN

Author of "The Nun," "Redemption," etc.

A story of Alsace full of this famous author's penetrative charm. It is of Alsace conquered, of those who remain loyal to France and those who compromise with the victors. Obeile is the name of a prominent Alsatian family, the head of which goes over to the winning side. Love complications arise among the younger members of the family, such as occurred in English History in the time of the Cavaliers and Roundheads. The atmosphere of Alsace under the new government is skilfully reproduced, and the conflict of racial feeling engendered admirably portrayed. The story is full of interest and excitement, and has the added charm of historical accuracy.

Between Two Stools.

RHODA BROUGHTON

Author of "Red as a Rose is She," "Cometh up as a Flower," etc.

This story deals with the situation of a man and woman—he single, she married, who have had a liaison of ten years' duration, while the woman's husband has been lying hopelessly crippled by an accident which happened before the opening of the narrative. The interest lies in the effect upon their characters, and in the emotions of hope, fear and remorse which agitate them. The situation is complicated by the apprehensions aroused by suspicion that the heroine's half-grown daughter divines something of the truth. The introduction of an unmarried girl to the hero entangles the knot still further—a knot which is untied only on the last page.

Camilla Forgetting Herself.

H. L. VAHEY

Author of "A Prisoner in Paradise."

Novels which 'lift one out of oneself,' which are not gloomy or sordid, and are not concerned with matrimonial failures, 'problems,' and the seamy side of marital life, are none too common; so that the refreshing and stimulating story of 'the incurably romantic' Camilla and her lover-husband will be hailed with delight by those who have not come to look upon marriage as a 'doubtful adventure characterized by the total surrender of freedom.' It is a humorous, 'lovey' and wholesome story, without a 'sugary flavour.' From the first page to the last line—in which Camilla tells her husband 'a great secret'—there is a spirit of Joy and Happiness pervading the book. To those of us who are still sufficiently old-fashioned to have matrimonial ideals, and a genuine belief in the existence of enduring, all-conquering love, Camilla will make a strong appeal. Though written in a light, bantering vein, the story contains an idea—a great idea, it may be—which is nothing more or less than a plea for *real* marriages; made in Heaven or otherwise, but founded, not upon legal forms, conventions and sacrifices, but upon a union of hearts. To those who found the psychology of Mr. Vahey's last book, 'A Prisoner in Paradise' (Stanley Paul) too strong, the present volume will come as a pleasant surprise.

The Bride of Love.

KATE HORN

Author of "Edward and I and Mrs. Honeybun," "Mulberries of Daphne," "The White Owl," "Lovelocks of Diana," "Ships of Desire," etc.

A love romance full of the charm which won for "Edward and I and Mrs. Honeybun" so many admirers. Psyche is a delightful heroine, whose face is her fortune. The story tells how Psyche and her little sister, Pomander, under trying circumstances battle their way to success, and will interest all who know what it is to cherish ideals which lie outside the sphere of their environment, and who ultimately win their own reward.

The Marriage of Lenore.

ALICE M. DIEHL

Author of "A Mysterious Lover," etc.

Lenore has married more than once, and thereby hang numerous complications. Her first husband is an elderly roue, and the second, who is present at her first marriage, restores to her the bouquet which she drops, and in this act and its recognition eyes and souls meet. There is a rumour that the first husband was a bigamist. Thereupon Lenore marries her second, only to find that her first husband's *mésalliance* was no marriage and that she herself has committed bigamy. The old husband dies, and so matters are set right. The story flows on through troubles and distractions, raptures and pains, to its happy ending.

God Disposes.

PELLEW HAWKER

A novel of quick changes, rapid movements, and striking dramatic situations, which opens with the description of a dead man sitting at his library table, his hand resting on his cheque book. The surreptitious visitor who makes the discovery secures the cheque book, forges the dead man's signature, and succeeds in cashing a cheque for a large amount. On the strength of the money he poses as a rich man, pushes himself into country society, and wins the heart of Lady Angela Dawson, who is affianced to Viscount Woolmer, the son and heir of Lord Bletchford, and the elder brother of the dead man. Later he claims to be the heir to the property, but in due course is discovered and exposed. The characterisation is good, the narrative interesting and the *dénouement* all that can be desired.

The Watch Night.

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